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**PRISCILLA
OF THE GOOD INTENT**

PRISCILLA OF THE GOOD INTENT

A ROMANCE OF THE GREY FELLS

BY

HALLIWELL SUTCLIFFE

AUTHOR OF

"RICHOFT OF WITHENS," "THROUGH BORROW'S GATES,"

"A BACHELOR IN ARCADY," ETC.

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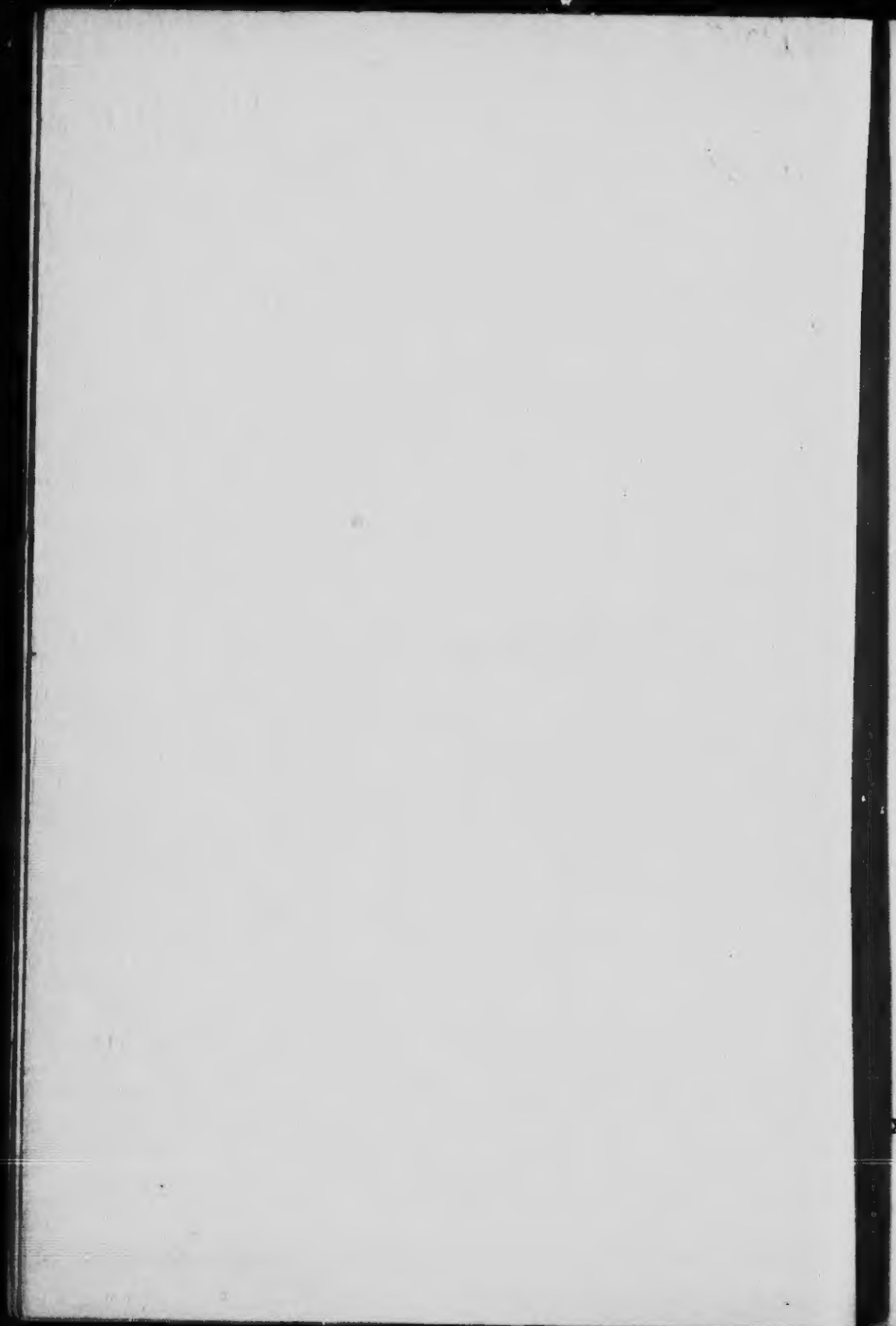
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TO
MY WIFE



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PRISCILLA OF THE GOOD INTENT

CHAPTER I

GREY GARTH

THE blacksmith's forge stood just this side of the village as you entered it from Shepston, and David Blake, the smith, was blowing lustily at his bellows, while the sweat dripped down his face. The cool of a spring morning came through the doorway, against which leaned a heavy, slouching lad.

"Te-he, David the Smith! Sparks do go scrambling up chimney," said Billy the Fool, with a fat and empty laugh.

They called him Billy the Fool for old affection's sake, with no sense of reproach; for the old ways of thought had a fast hold on Garth village, and a natural was held in a certain awe, as being something midway between a prophet and a child.

"Ay, sparks are scrambling up. 'Tis a way they have, Billy," answered the other cheerily. "What's your news?"

Again Billy laughed, but cunningly this time. "Grand news—all about myself. Was up at sunrise, and been *doing naught* ever since. I'm main fond of doing naught, David. Seems to trickle down your body, does idleness, like good ale."

The blacksmith loosed his hold on the bellows' handles and turned about, while he passed a hand across his forehead.

"Is there naught ye like better than idleness?" he asked. "Think now, Billy—just ponder over it."

"Well, now," answered the other, after a silence, "there's playing—what ye might call playing at a right good game. Could ye think of some likely pastime, David?"

"Ay, could I. Blowing bellows is the grandest frolic ever I came across."

Billy was wary, after his own fashion, and he looked at the blacksmith hard, his child's eyes—blue and unclouded by the storms of life—showing big beneath their heavy brows of reddish-brown.

"I doubt 'tis work, David," he said dispassionately.

"Nay, now! Would I ask *thee* to work, lad? Fond o' thee as I am, and knowing labour's harmful to thee?"

"I shouldn't like to be trapped into work. 'Twould scare me when I woke o' nights and thought of it."

"See ye, then, Billy"—blowing the bellows gently—"is it work to make yon sparks go, blue and green and red, as fast as ever ye like to drive 'em? Play, I call it, and I've a mind, now I come to think on't, just to keep ye out o' the game, and go on playing it myself."

Billy drew nearer, with an anxious look. "Ye wouldn't do that, or ye'd not be Blacksmith David," he said, with unerring knowledge of the other's kindliness. "'Tis just a bit o' sporting—I hadn't thought of it i' that light."

And soon he was blowing steadily; for the lad's frame was a giant's, when he chose to use it, and no fatigue had ever greatly touched him. From time to time, as the blacksmith paused to take a red-hot bar from the furnace or to put a cold one in, he would nod cheerfully at Billy the Fool and emphasise the frolicsome side of his employment.

"Ye've an easy time, Billy," he would say. "See me sweating here at beating iron into horsehoe shape—and ye playing at chasing sparks all up the chimney!"

The sweat was pouring from Billy, too, by this time, but he did not heed. Plump and soft his laugh came, as he forced the sparks more swiftly from the coals.

"Was born for playtimes, I, David," he cried in great delight. "I've heard tell of silver spoons, popped unbeknownst-like into babbies' cradles. I war a babby o' that make, I reckon, for sure 'tis I'm always playing, when I'm not always idling in between times."

"Ye were lucky fro' birth," David answered, driving the hole for the last nail. "Some folk is, while other-some must work."

"Why *do* ye work, David?" asked the other, with entire simplicity.

"Oh, just a fancy, lad. Seems as I have to, somehow. There were no silver spoons dropped into *my* cradle. Hive o' bees swarmed there, I fancy, for I've had a few in my bonnet ever since."

There was another silence, while Billy, working hard at the bellows, looked long and meditatively at David Blake.

"I wouldn't like to hurt ye, David," he said at last, "but I reckon ye're just a bit daft-witted like. Why don't ye play or idle all your time, same as I do?"

David threw the finished horseshoe on the heap at his left hand, and was about to answer when a shadow came between the reeking smithy and the fresh and open sunshine beyond the door.

"Oh, 'tis ye, Priscilla?" he said, looking up. "Ye've got the spring-look in your face."

As she stood half in, half out of the smithy door, Priscilla was radiant in her young and pliant beauty. To David Blake's fancy—rough, kindly, not far wide of the mark at any time—she "made the day new-washed and happier"; yet it was Billy the Fool who next found his tongue.

"Te-he! Ye look as if life was playtime for ye, too," said he, still blowing at his bellows, but looking at her alily over his shoulder.

"May be," she laughed—and the kind, wise music of the thrush was in her laughter. "'Tis very true, Billy. Life's playtime for me."

David Blake looked at her, and liked her a little the better; for he knew that Priscilla worked hard, worked long and with a blithe face, each day of her life. To the blacksmith it seemed, in between doing odd jobs that brought him in a livelihood, that his prime work in life was to love Priscilla ever and ever a little more—and each day to find himself more tongue-tied in her presence.

Again it was Billy who took up the talk, though Blake would think to-morrow of twenty things he might have said, and curse himself in a quiet way for having failed to say them.

"I'm always playing, as a man might say, myself," chuckled the Fool. "Playing at bellows-blowing now. Sec the life sparks go up, Miss Priscilla—'tis I that send them, right enough."

"Why, yes," she said, nodding pleasantly at his wide and gaping face. "We're playing, Billy, you and I. Only the blacksmith works."

"He's a bit of a fool, by that token," hazarded Billy.

The blacksmith, when he laughed at all, laughed from his lungs outward. "Always guessed it, Priscilla," said he, making his anvil ring. "Billy's a child, but old in wisdom. Bit of a fool I'll be to the end, I reckon."

"I'm playing, David," said Billy, while the blacksmith halted in his work to steal a glance at Priscilla. "Get ye on with your work o' making horseshoes, if I'm playing the tune to ye."

Again David laughed. "Keeps me at it, Priscilla," he said. "Never met a taskmaster so hard to drive a man as Billy."

"We want ye at Good Intent," said Priscilla, laughing too—and her laughter was a pleasant thing to hear, reminding David again of throistles when the spring comes in.

"You can ease your hold of the bellows, Billy," said David, with an alacrity that was patent to the girl, modest and proud as she was. "When I am called to Good Intent Farm—well, I go, most times, and ne'er ask what's wanted, and leave smithy-work behind."

"Robbing me o' my playtime," panted Billy the Fool, as he mopped his forehead.

He looked up at David, and his brown eyes were wistful as a dog's asking for commands.

"Ye'll be idle now," said the blacksmith. "Play first, laddie, and idleness after."

"Ay, you're right—you're always right, saving odd times, when you're a Fool Billy like myself. Miss Priscilla has a trick o' making ye daft-witted, I've noticed."

The village natural, with his huge body and his big, child's eyes, had a way of finding out his neighbours' secrets, and had no shame at all in telling folk what each wanted to hide from the other. Priscilla turned her face away, and David reddened like a lovesick lad.

"Keep the forge-fire going quietly," said the blacksmith. "That's idleness for ye—just to lie dreaming this side of it, and time and time to put the fuel on."

"Ay, that's idleness," said Billy, as he stretched himself—again like a shaggy, trusty dog—along the smithy floor. "Get ye to work, David, and leave me to my playtime."

They went out into the springtime, David and Priscilla, and the breeze was cool and sweet about them as if it blew from beds of primroses. The lass wished that David Blake had more to say, wished that the quickness of the spring would run off his tongue's end; she did not know that he felt it—more than she, may be—but had no words in which to tell her of it.

"You make a body thoughtless-like, Priscilla," he said at last. "Never asked ye what the job was I was wanted for; and here am I without a tool to my back."

David was able to do so many jobs, and do them

handily, that it might be one of twenty that was wanted from him to-day, and he looked anxiously at Priscilla, to ask if he should go back for his tools.

"I was watching the water-wagtails," she answered, scarcely hearing him. "They're home to the old stream again, David, and that means the spring is here, or hereabouts."

He watched the pair of mating birds sit, first on the low stone wall that guarded the stream, then flicker to the road, their white tails moving like a lady's fan.

"Mating time, Priscilla," said he.

Something in his voice, something in the true, quiet ring of it, moved Priscilla strangely.

"They're bonnie birds, David," she said. "Winter's out, and springtime's coming in, when they wag their trim, white tails."

"Ay, true. But what tools ought I to have brought, like?"

Priscilla sighed, for dull-wittedness did not commend itself to-day. "No tools at all, David. The roan cow I'm so fond of has lodged a slice of turnip in her throat, and father cannot move it."

"Easy as falling out of a tree, Priscilla. Lord, I thought you farmer-folk knew somewhat—but when it comes to a cow, ye've got to whistle for David the Smith!"

Priscilla glanced at him with a roguery as dainty and secure as that of the spring itself. "They say ye can talk to the four-footed things, David, and make them understand ye. Pity ye can't spare more words for us poor two-footed folk."

"Ay, but the beasts are sensible, somehow, lass. They don't maze ye up with words and what ye might call the frills and furbelows o' life—they just look at ye, and feel your hands going smooth and quiet down their flanks, and *they know*."

"Billy has that sort of instinct, I have noticed," said Priscilla, demurely. "There's not a dog in the countryside

that won't come and fawn on him—though some of our dogs are not just gentle."

David gave another of his great hearty laughs. "My father always said, when he was alive, that I'd been intended for a natural, and missed it only by good luck. I'm fond of Billy the Fool myself; simple and slow is Billy, and what he lacks in wit he makes up for in heart-room."

"That's true, David," said the girl, a little daunted, as she often was, by David's settled outlook upon things.

For herself, there were times when she longed to cross the limits of this life at Garth, longed for the romance of the beyond; but when David talked as he was talking now she felt shamefacedly that he was in the right to be content within the boundaries of the fields and the blithe, raking hills, the village smithy and the village farmsteads.

David Blake did not belie his reputation when, after following the wood-path through the Ghyll, they came to Good Intent—a grey and well-found homestead—and sought the mistals. What with surgeon's skill and the skill that comes from utter friendship with all cattle, he did what neither Priscilla nor her father could have done.

"Give you thanks, David," said Farmer Hirst, a broad, well-timbered man, with a voice like thunder on the distant hills. "She's the pick of the lot, this roan ye've saved, and saving's saving, whether it's your child or your cow that's ailing."

"Ah, now!" murmured the blacksmith, "there's joy in saving beasties, and no thanks needed."

"Well, thanks are waiting for ye when ye care to pick 'em up—which ye seldom do, David—and meanwhile I've to see if my men are cutting the thorn-hedge to my liking. Priscilla, there's cake and ale within doors; there's one in Garth can look better to David's needs than ever I could do."

Now David's laugh was hearty; but it was a child's whisper when compared with Farmer Hirst's, especially when the older man fancied that he was using rare diplom.

A true yeoman of the north was this master of Good Intent—owned his own house and land, his own quiet, wholesome pride, his line of goodly forbears. And so, because he had learned to know a man when he saw him, he had long ago chosen David as the favoured suitor.

"Lasses must wed, leaving their fathers lonely," the farmer would say to himself as he sat o' nights—Priscilla gone to bed—and drank his nightcap of hot rum. I'd have been less lonesome-like if Priscilla's mother wasn't lying green under sod, and me alone save for Cilla. But lasses must wed, and I've seen o' late the mating look in Priscilla's face. Well, her mother wore that look, once on a day, and I've seen no better in my long life, and never shall. It must be David—oh, ay, it must be David!"

So he left them together that morning, and his big voice seemed to echo up and down the grey, stone hills long after he had left.

Farmer Hirst had given the blacksmith many chances of this kind; and always it had been, as now, the signal for David to grow tongue-tied, for Priscilla to show the wild-rose flag of maidenly rebellion in her cheeks.

"'Tis kindly, this smell of a mistal," ventured David, by and by. "Sweet o' the kine, I call it—'tis so lusty and so big to smell."

Priscilla answered nothing. There's something in the fragrance of a cattle-byre that makes for wooing, no man can tell you why; and the lass was young and was feeling two spring seasons meet in her—spring of her untried youth, and spring of the tried old world that knows its faith.

"Cilla, the throistles are singing out of doors," said he, bending an ear toward the open fields.

His meaning should have been clear; for, when a throistle sings across the reek of an open mistal-door, the human oddities of speech should be altogether lost, and the world's tongue interpret all. Yet Priscilla missed it, and disdained the thrush's clarion-note.

"Ay, David, and the world is turning round about the sun, and the stars come out o' nights, and I've to do my churning by and by. David, is there naught beyond your throstles and your stars and the sun that guides the world?"

"Naught," answered David, stolidly. "They're life, Priscilla, and maybe when we're hid beneath the sward we'll know of bonnier things—but not just yet, I'm thinking."

It was David's moment, had he known it. It needed a touch, a glance, a right word spoken that should ring in tune with the spring; and while he halted there came a sound of whistling across the mistal-yard. It was not like Farmer Hirst to turn back when once he had set off, and Priscilla wondered whose the footstep could be—the step that was quicker and lighter than her father's.

"One of the farm men, may be," muttered David, remembering, now that the opportunity was like to be lost, the one right speech he should have whispered into Priscilla's ear.

"No—nor yet father's. 'Tis a town-bred step, David. Cannot you hear him picking his way, as if he thought the sweet yard-litter could hurt a body's feet?"

"Ay, now you name it, so I can. Treads niperty-like, as a cat does. Mistrust that sort of going, I. Who can he be, Priscilla?"

"Some stranger likely. Some one that's never smelled the warmth of a cattle-byre, so I should say."

The footsteps sounded near and hurried now. David and the girl, looking from the shadows of the mistal into the open sunlight, saw a well-dressed figure of a man—a man neither short nor tall, neither dark nor fair—a man no way remarkable, unless the sun was full upon him, as now, and showed the uncertain eyes which long ago had been a puzzle to his mother when he stood beside her knee.

"There was no one at Good Intent, except old Martha,"

said the newcomer, lifting his hat with an air which David Blake could not have copied had Priscilla's love depended on it. "She told me you were here—'likely,' she added, in the queer speech I used to know, 'seeing the roan cow was sick, and you were tending her.' Priscilla, surely you've not forgotten me?"

David Blake was the best-tempered man in all the long vale of Strathgarth, so folks said; but there were times when he was as ill to meet, as ill to look at, as if he had been a north-born dog, guarding a north-built threshold from stranger he distrusted. And David listened to this pretty-prat man who tried to mimic old Martha's wholesome speech; and Priscilla, glancing sideways at the man who should have wooed her in the mistal—as women will glance toward a known lover from a rival known by instinct—Priscilla saw David Blake in a new guise, and one not pleasant to her on this peaceful day of spring.

She smiled at the newcomer, inclining her head a little in the pretty, willowy fashion that Garth village liked. "I do not remember you at all.—Stay, though," she added, seeing the sunlight on his face, with its inscrutable, wild eyes, "long ago—when I was a child——"

"Five years ago, Priscilla. Surely you remember?"

"Why, yes," said Priscilla, with a sudden friendly smile. "You're Reuben Gaunt—and I was fourteen in those days!"

David went to smooth the flanks of the roan cow, who turned her head and licked his waistcoat tranquilly from the topmost to the lowest button.

"I knew him at sight," growled the smith. "Garth has been well rid of him these five years, to my thinking. Pity he's come back."

He glanced again at the other man, and was overtaken by an impulse to throw his adversary bodily out of the mistal-yard; so he pulled himself together, as one who was accustomed to follow kindly instincts only.

"Well, I'll be jogging, Priscilla," he said, making for

the door. "The cow is ailing naught so much, and 'tis time I got to smithy-work again."

"So you've forgotten me, too, David?" said the stranger airily, as Blake was pushing past him.

"Nay," answered David, not seeing the proffered hand. "I remember you well, Gaunt o' Marshlands—and I'll bid you good-day, as I was ever glad to do."

CHAPTER II

THE FAR LANDS OF BEYOND

"THAT's a pleasant sort of welcome, eh?" said Gaunt, as he watched David's broad back disappear round the corner of the stables.

Priscilla's interest was awakened already, and the smith had done an ill turn to his own cause by arousing her sympathy as well.

"You'll find pleasanter welcomes here in Garth," the girl answered, with that candour of thought and expression which in itself was dignity. "It was stupid of me to forget you, Mr. Gaunt, but I was so little, when you used to play big brother to me and show me all the wonders of the Dene."

"I think it must not be Mr. Gaunt. The folk who like me call me Reuben, as you did once."

Priscilla was vaguely disturbed. Yet she pushed the distrust aside; for this man had been away from Garth for five long years, had seen the mysteries hidden in the beyond, and doubtless he could tell her of them.

"We are older now," she answered, a little smile belying her rebuke. "It must be Mr. Gaunt, or naught at all."

"Well, then, it must be Miss Priscilla, too?"

"'Twould be fitting, I think. Five years are not bridged in a moment, and father tells me I'm a woman grown—though I feel a child, when spring comes in," she finished, with that low, happy laugh of hers.

An older and more constant playmate than Gaunt of Marshlands sang to her—sang blithe and high—through

the mistal door; but she scarcely heard the throstle, for Gaunt brought news from the beyond.

"Where have you been these years past?" she asked, moving restlessly from foot to foot.

"Everywhere, I fancy," laughed the other. "I've seen the world, as I always meant to do; and a queer world I've found it."

As a child wipes the school-day's sums from its slate, Priscilla lost the record of her working and her playtime hours. The grey serenity of Gaunt, the sweetness of its roadside gardens, the slow, rich gossip of its folk—these things went by her. She forgot the low, musical humming of the churn, the look of the butter as it lay, round and golden as a kingcup, on the stone tables of the dairy. She heard no longer the splash of milk into the foamy pail, the lowing of the kine as they gave their evensong of praise.

Not restless now, she leaned against the stall, her eyes wandering now and then to Gaunt's, then returning to the mistal-yard and the croft beyond. She was listening to this man who had spent five years beyond the limits of Garth village, and his tales enthralled her. In an absent way she wondered that those well-known fields, the familiar yard, had never seemed so small as now.

Reuben Gaunt was talking well. This, her lissome outline framed by the mistal-stall, her hands clasped above her head, the lights and shadows of the byre playing constantly about her eager eyes, might well have moved a duller wit than Gaunt's to make the most of itself. And, when he stopped, Priscilla was silent, her head thrown further back and her glance going out and out, over the grey field-walls of Strathgarth, over its dingles and its hills—out to the borderland, and across into the unknown.

"You have come back suddenly," she said at last. "None knew in Garth that you were coming home, or father must have heard of it."

"I chose to return that way—to see what sort of

welcome Garth would give me. And, gad, I learned from David Blake quite soon enough," he finished, with an easy laugh.

"And shall you stay among us?"

He had been watching her during that long silence. Faults in plenty the man had, but in his way he could understand the finer lines of beauty; and now, as he met Priscilla's eyes, he found her exquisite—something as faultless, and yet as natural, as a harebell swaying to the wind.

"Yes, I shall stay," he answered.

Her eyes fell, in answer, not to the words, but to the tone. And, because she had been wont to look all folk bravely in the face, she grew impatient.

"I cannot idle all the morning through," she said. "I'll give you good-day, Mr. Gaunt, and get to my housework."

David Blake, meanwhile, had turned aside before he reached his smithy, and had crossed, by the stile at the road corner, into the field where Farmer Hirst was busy hedge-cutting with his men.

"Hallo, David! Followed me up, like, have ye?" roared Hirst, as he chanced to turn his head while the smith was still half a field away.

"Ay, I like the sound of thorn-cutting," answered David, as he drew nearer. "Thought I'd come and set ye straight if ye were showing faulty hedgecraft."

The two farm men turned with their billhooks in their hands. They nodded at David and grinned at his simple pleasantry. Lithe, clean-built fellows they were, both of them, such as they breed within the boundaries of Strathgarth, and they were friends and, save in the matter of wage-earning, roughly the equals of their master.

"Come ye, then," chuckled the farmer. "See what we've done a'ready, David! See how trim and snug we've got the line on't! Nay, not that way, lad!" he broke off, as one of the hinds began to lay a stout hawthorn stem,

sawn half-way through, all out of line with its fellow on the left.

He bent the branch as he would have it lie, then stepped aside—for a heavy man, Hirst was oddly active in his movements—and set to work to pluck a root of dog-briar from its deep bed. Twist and turn the root in his hands as he might, it would not budge.

"'Tis all these durned leather gloves," he said, throwing his gauntlets off. "They keep the prickles out, David—or reckon to—but when a body wants his naked hands—well, let him wear them naked."

Again he tugged, but the old root would not give; so David grasped Priscilla's father by the middle, and "*Yoick!*" he cried, and they pulled together. The root left its hold, more suddenly than they had counted on, and David, being the hinder of the two, bore the full brunt of the farmer's fall.

David got to his feet by and by, and coaxed the wind back into his lungs. Farmer Hirst was laughing till the tears ran down his ruddy face; the men were laughing, too; David, soon as he found breath, fetched out that slow, deep body-merriment of his.

"We got him out o' ground! Oh, ay, we daunted yond old briar-root!" said he.

Whereat the four laughed so heartily that a pair of curlews—just returned, like Reuben Gaunt, from sojourning God knows where—got up from the further side of the fence, and went crying toward the moor.

"Briar-roots are the devil and all," said Hirst, "when ye come to clean a hedge-bottom."

"They bear bonny roses, all the same, when June come in," ventured the blacksmith, not telling Hirst that wild roses reminded him, too often for his peace of mind, of Priscilla. "Pity to stomp 'em up, say I, and pity came of my lending my hand to the job just now."

He made pretence to rub himself, as if the farmer's bulk had raised painful sores on him. It is easy to laugh when

the spring's a-coming in, and the four workers startled a black-faced ewe that was near to her lambing season.

"Get away wi' your jests, David," answered Farmer Hirst. "D'ye think I want to have my lambs dropped hasty-like in the ditch down yonder?"

Yet by and by, when they had worked their fill at the hedge-cutting, and it was dinner-time, David drew the farmer aside. He had not known till now what had brought him to the fields here, instead of to the smithy where he had urgent work to do. For the blacksmith's brain was like an eight-day clock that stands in the kitchen corner; it moved slowly—*tick-tack, tick-tack*, with sober repetition—but, when the moment came to strike the hour, there was never any doubt as to the time he had in mind.

"John Hirst," he said, "ne'er mind your dinner yet awhile. I've somewhat lies on my chest, as a body might say."

"Well, I lay there not a long while since, a trifle sudden and a trifle hard," laughed Hirst.

"Ah, now, will ye be quiet? I'm like Fool Billy, as Priscilla said just now, and ye think I'm jesting when I'm trying to talk sober sense."

"Dinner-time is sober sense, David, judging by my itch to get at cheese and bread and good brown ale. What then, lad? What ails ye?"

"I'm slow of speech, like my smithy bellows," went on the other doggedly. "I find the right word always the day after to-morrow, instead of the day's minute that I want it."

"I've a trick of that kind myself, David. What then? Speech is speech, but trimming a thorn-hedge, or ploughing for your turnip crop, is a sight better than hunting words. Tuts, David! Ye're yellow about the gills, and some trouble's sitting on ye, by that token."

"Ay, some trouble is," said David.

"Priscilla gave ye cake and ale?" put in the other anxiously.

"She forgot—and I forgot to lack it." David's eyes followed the neat line of the hedge, and he nodded gravely at it. "Wish men were more like thorn-bushes, John—wish you could lop their unruliness, and twist their ill-grown branches into shape, and make a clean, useful hedge at the end of all."

Farmer Hirst was thinking of his dinner with gaining tenderness. "What is in your mind, David, lad?" he asked. "'Tis like watching the kettle boil, this getting at your meaning."

"Reuben Gaunt is back again in Garth," the smith blurted out. "That's my meaning, John, and I tell you we could well have let him stay t'other side of the world, and ne'er have missed him."

The farmer's face clouded for a moment. "We could have spared him—ay. But what of it? Because a fool chooses to come home again, are we to go pulling fiddle-faces on a blithe day like this? Hark ye, David, I'll not bide a minute longer; there's cheese and ale all waiting in the hedge-bottom yonder, and you're going to share it with us."

So David laid his trouble aside for the moment, and the four of them sat on the sunny hedge-bank, and said little until for the second or third time they took more cheese to help the butter out, or more bread to help the cheese out, or another pull of ale "to settle the lot trimly into place."

"Wonderful March weather," said the farmer, draining a last draught. "Near to April, and not a lamb-storm yet. 'Twill be twelve year since I remember such a spring."

"Found a primrose this morn," said one of the farm men. "Wonderful weather, I'll own, farmer—but what's to come with April? March is a dog that should bark, say I—else I mistrust her?"

"Ah, get ye along!" cried Hirst. "I believe the best o' the weather, I, and always did. They laugh at me in

Shepton market—say I'm no true farmer, because I'll not speak o' the weather as if she were a jade for any man to mock at."

There was a silence, while the men lay tranquilly against the bank and watched the blue sky trail her draperies of cool, white fleece along the west wind's track.

"Reuben Gaunt is home, I've heard," said one of the farm hands presently. "Came last night, all unbeknownst-like, same fashion as he left, five years since."

"There'll be brisk times for the lasses, then," put in his fellow drily.

Again the farmer's face darkened for a moment. "'Tis work-time, lads, and many a yard of hedge to fettle up before we get our suppers. Best talk no gossip."

"I'll be getting to my own work, too," said David, nodding his farewells and moving down the field.

At another time he would have put his own work off, would have taken a hand till nightfall with the hedge-trimmers, would have given them jest for jest and laugh for laugh, while he trimmed, and cut, and bent the hawthorn boughs into their places. But to-day he could not.

"There'll be brisk times for the lasses, then," he muttered, echoing the farm hand's idle speech. "Ay, there's always trouble o' that sort when Reuben Gaunt's at hand."

Through the quiet fields he went, but they brought little benediction to him. He remembered Gaunt and all his ways, remembered how, when he left Garth, there had been no sadness in the men's faces, but grief and bitterness in many women's.

"What the dangment do they see in him, these lasses?" growled David, as he climbed the wall and dropped into the high-road. "Littlish in the build—face as good to look at as a mangold-wurzel's—must be those devil's eyes of his, that never lie still for a moment, but go hunting like a dog that sniffs a fresh scent every yard."

David had summed up his man with unerring judgment. Had Gaunt been downright evil, it would have been easier for the men of Garth to have thrashed him long ago into likelier and more wholesome ways. But even to-day, when he was in a mood that, for him, was bitter, the blacksmith knew that his enemy was neither good nor bad, but purposeless. He had watched him grow from childhood; and year by year his name of Reuben seemed more and more a prophecy of days to come.

"Unstable as water—ay, just that," thought David, as he reached the smithy.

Billy the Fool, after dusting the smithy fire with coke and smudge, had settled himself to sleep again; but he was awake on the instant when David's footsteps sounded on the roadway. He rose, and shook himself with a big, heedless satisfaction.

"I've been a-dreaming, David the Smith," was his greeting. "Dreamed I was wise, like ye are at most times—saving when Miss Priscilla comes."

"Ay?" said the other, patting Billy on the shoulder.

"I didn't like it, David! I was glad to waken. There was no frolic in't."

"I can believe ye, lad. What news, Billy, since I went up street?"

It was the habit in Garth village to ask Billy for news, however many times a day you met him, though none could give a reason for the idle custom.

"Ay, there's news. I've been at my games again, David the Smith." A smile broadened slowly across the placid face, while the blacksmith listened good-humouredly.

"Never met your like for games, Billy," he said, fingering his tools after the fashion of a man who means to begin work by and by, but not just yet.

David, indeed, was thinking less of work, and less of Billy, than of the encounter in the mistal. Reuben Gaunt had come like a shadow between the springtime and himself, had blurred the sun for him: keen to foresee, as slow

men often are, the blacksmith felt as if a blight had fallen on Garth village, checking the warmth, holding the green buds in their sheaths.

Yet Billy soon claimed his ear. "I'd looked to your fire," went on the natural, "and stepped out into the road, to see what time o' day it was. Perhaps a half-hour since it was—and what d'ye think, David?"

"Couldn't guess, lad—couldn't guess."

"Well, there was a littlish man, all dressed up as if 'twere Sunday; and he came down the road, and I knew he'd been to Good Intent."

David glanced sharply up. "How did you know that?"

"Miss Priscilla lives there. All the young men—and happen a few o' the old 'una, too—will always be wending their way to Good Intent when spring comes in. Habit o' theirs, David—habit o' theirs! I go that way myself, sometimes."

The blacksmith, not for the first time, was puzzled by Billy the Fool. The natural's unerring instinct for all that made for the primitive in bird or beast or human-folk, when coupled with his child's disdain of everyday good sense, would have troubled keener wits than David's. He recognised Reuben Gaunt, moreover, from the other's description, and he fingered his tools no longer, but followed Billy's story.

"Came whistling down the road, did the littlish chap. I wondered, like, at what, for ye or me could have outsized him two or three times over."

David laughed, though he was little in the mood for it. At every turn of the way to-day—whether he was talking to Priscilla, or dining in the hedge-bottom with Farmer Hirst, or talking to Billy—Gaunt's shadow crossed his path. Yet he laughed; for he was simple, too, and big, and there was something that tickled his fancy in this quiet assumption that little men had little right to whistle on the Queen's highway.

"Came whistling down, did he?" asked the blacksmith, strangely eager for the story.

"Ay, and stopped when he saw me. 'Flick-a-moroo!' says he, and tickled my chin, and seemed to think he'd played a jest on me."

Again David chuckled; for there was none in the Dale of Strathgarth that could mimic a man so faithfully as Billy, and he had caught Gaunt's accent to the life.

"*Flick-a-moroo*, says I, easy as answering a blackbird when he calls. I didn't like having my chin tickled, David, but I bided, as one might say. And then he says—'tis queer and strange how little a grown man can be, yet can strut like a turkey-cock—'Ye seem to know what's the meaning of *flick-a-moroo*,' says he, 'though it's more than I do.' 'Ay, I know the meaning of *flick-a-moroo*,' I says."

"Well, lad?" asked David, waiting till he had finished a laugh that came before the end of the story.

"Ye see, David"—a happy, cunning look was in the natural's face—"ye see, we were near t' other side o' the road yonder, and I minded there was a snug, far drop over th' wall, and some young nettles growing soft as a feather-bed. So I says again, 'Oh, ay,' says I, 'I know the meaning o' *flick-a-moroo*,' says I; and I catches him, heels and head—'twould have made ye crack wi' laughter, David the Smith, to see it—and I holds him over the wall awhile, and drops him soft as a babby into th' nettles."

Again David laughed. He could not help it. "And then, Fool Billy?" he asked.

"Why, I went and looked at him, and I says, 'Oh, ay, I know what's the meaning o' *flick-a-moroo*,' says I—and so do ye, I'm thinking'—not but what he took it well, I own. He got up as mad as a turkey-cock, and I thought he was going to spring o'er-wall at my throat. Then he laughed—sudden-like, as if he couldn't help it—and th' last I heard of him, as he swung down-road, he was langhing still."

David felt a joy in this daft enterprise as keen as Billy's. It was the expression of feelings which he had only checked with an effort up yonder in the mistal-yard.

"'Twas outrageous, and not like ye, Billy," the smith observed, his whole face twinkling. "Shouldn't be more civil when strangers come to Garth."

Billy looked apprehensive for a moment; of all things, he hated the reproof of those whom, in his innocence, he fancied to be wiser than himself. A glance at David's face, however, reassured him.

"Civil when strangers are civil, David," he chuckled. For Billy, vague as his outlook upon morals was, showed himself persistently on the side of the Old Testament. "I'd bested him, ye see! Owned he didn't know what *fick-a-moroo* meant. Billy the Fool did."

"We'll have a change of play, Billy," said the smith. "Just make the bonnie sparks go scumming up again, and I'll to my work o' making horseshoes."

David stole many a look at the other's face as they went forward with their labour. He was realising that there were possibilities of tragedy about this lad with the big frame and the dangerous strength. It was a jest to drop a man gently into a bed of nettles—but what if Billy's passion were roused in earnest? What if some one pierced through that slothful outer crust of his, and touched some deeper instinct in him?

"Might be a sort of earthquake hidden in poor Billy," he muttered. "'Tis hard to guess what he's thinking of, right at the beating heart of the chap."

The smith would have been astonished, had he been able to sound these heart-beats of his comrade's. It was Priscilla he was thinking of—Priscilla of the Good Intent—Priscilla, who brought the sunshine into Garth for one poor fool whenever she crossed his path.

"She'll be fettling up the house-place now, I reckon," said Billy, suddenly.

"Who, lad?"

"Why, Miss Priscilla. 'Tis her time of day for doing on't. Te-he, David! I hoicked yond chap fair grandly over th' wall—Sunday clothes, and *pretty-prat* speech, and all. Nettles don't sting this month, they say—but I've known 'em do that same."

CHAPTER III

A BASKET OF EGGS

SPRING was abroad indeed these days. Garth village, good to see even in grey winter-time, grew to the likeness of a well-kept garden. The winding street—white at one time, then glistening-grey when the sun shone on it through April rain—moved lazily between the cottages and the yeomen's square, substantial houses. And always, between the house-front and the highway, there was a garden, big or little. Sometimes—when the cottage was so small in itself that there seemed no room for a garden-space—there would be a strip, no more than two feet wide, fenced round to guard it from the wandering ducks and geese and dogs of Garth. Sometimes a bigger house would shrink, with disdainful pride, from too close a rubbing of shoulders with the street; and its garden would be trim, and guarded by a grey stone wall, with a white-painted gate in the middle of the wall.

But always, right and left of the good street of Garth, there were gardens, and, whatever their size or shape might be, the same flowers bloomed in all. Crocuses still glowed yellow when the sun came out to waken them; but these were of the older generation, and daffodils were nodding already high above them with the effrontery of youth. Auriculas were showing the white miller's-dust about their buds; the ladslove bushes pushed out green, fragrant spikes into this unexpected weather; primroses caught the laughter of the spring, and celandines looked humbly at the sunlight.

Priscilla of the Good Intent, as she came down the

street, was no way out of keeping—so the kindly gossips said, standing each at her sunlit door—with the gardens and the weather. For it was true that not men only, but women, were reminded always of a flower when their eyes fell on Priscilla; and each was apt to choose his own favourite as Oilla's namesake.

The village parliament, made up of men and women both, is seldom wrong when it passes judgment on a neighbour; and there was none in Garth who would deny off-hand that Priscilla of the Good Intent was rightly named, thanks to the title of the farm on which her father, and his fathers before him, had laboured thankfully.

"There goes slim Miss Good Intent," said one cottager to another, across the quickset hedge that parted them.

"Ay! Sunshine all along the street," the other answered. "Trust she'll fall into a good man's hands; for into some hands she'll fall soon, or else a lad will just reach up and pluck her."

Priscilla had smiled and nodded to them as she passed—nodded and smiled down the length of Garth Street, as if she were the lady of the village. She was no less, indeed, for she had that simple pride which knows its station and disdains no greeting on life's high-road. Unspoiled as a primrose, opening to the warmth of spring, was Priscilla; and it seemed the pity of life that she should ever have to meet contrary winds.

Billy the Fool, at the extreme end of Garth, was passing the time of day with David Blake, as his wont was; for the two were rather like an elder and a younger brother, and sought each other out by instinct. It was two weeks and a day since Billy had dropped his victim into a bed of growing nettles, and neither he nor David had spoken of the matter since—the blacksmith, because he was too fastidious, in a rough fashion, when a rival was in case; the natural, because he forgot such trifles until the season for remembrance came. Reuben Gaunt, for his part, had kept silence, and had thanked heaven, in his own random way, that the

jest of his sitting down among the nettles was not common gossip now in Garth.

"The birds are all a-mating and a-building, David the Smith," said Billy. "Cannot ye hear the throistles calling to the hen-birds?"

"Ay," growled David, a sudden anger coming to him; "but ye and me are no way mated, Billy the Fool. What ails us, lad?"

"Life ails us," said Billy, unexpectedly. "We're over-slow and over-pleasant, David. Chase 'em and have 'em, David—that's how I've seen the bird-folk go a-wooing. Te-he, there's Miss Priscilla!" he broke off, and seemed about to run and greet her, in his friendly, dog-like way, when a second figure came into the street from the bridle-track that led to Thorlburn.

The natural stopped suddenly, as if he had been indeed a dog and his master had whistled him down.

"Garth Street is not what it used to be, David," he observed dispassionately. "More muckiness about the roads, though why I know not, seeing they're smooth and silver at this moment."

David said nothing for awhile; but he saw Reuben Gaunt lift his cap to Priscilla, with that air of overdoing the matter which roused the blacksmith's temper. He saw, too, that they stayed and chatted—Priscilla laughing—and afterwards went up the Thorlburn bridle-way, which led to a field-track winding at long last to Good Intent.

"Step in, Billy," said the smith—his voice came suddenly, and was half-brother to a sob—"step away in and play at blowing bellows, while I fire the ends of those posts that Farmer Hirst is wanting."

"What does he want 'em for, like?" asked the natural, curious at all times.

"To make a pen for yond rambling turkeys. The hens will go wandering after the cock-bird, and they're laying eggs all in the hedge-bottoms, and over t'other side the beck, and Lord knows where. 'Tisn't the hens I blame, Billy;

'tis the ruffling master-bird, with his tail spread like a silly peacock's. We'll pen him in, Billy—and, if he breaks his neck in the wire-netting, so much the better for all sides."

It was rarely that David allowed himself so stormy an outbreak. Had he taken his wooing in this fashion two weeks and a day ago in the farmyard of Good Intent, breaking down the barriers of diffidence—Priscilla's and his own—there might have been a different life-tale for David the Smith.

"*Te-he!*" chuckled Billy the Fool, shambling towards the smithy. "'Twould be a rare game to pen in the turkey-cock. *Gobble-gobble-di-gobble*, he goes, whenever he comes across the likes o' me, and his wattle goes red as the floor, David, when a man's been killing a cow. Ay, I'll blow the bellows for ye, if you're going to prison-up yond old, prideful devil."

"Soothes a body's temper," muttered David, after he had been at work for half an hour—thrusting the pine-posts into the blaze, turning them about, taking them away when the pointed ends were charred sufficiently, while Billy played contentedly and hard with the bellows. "God knows I'd like to see Priscilla happy, with me or another man; but Reuben Gaunt sticks in my gizzard like a fish-bone." He laughed quietly, for he always sought from humour an antidote against the storm-winds of life. "Suits me, seemingly," he said to himself, "to be fair mad with a man; for work takes the tetchy humours out of ye, and work pays ye afterwards."

Could David have left his forge more often, in order to seek Priscilla's company—and he was well-found already in the bread-and-cheese of life, and knew that there were savings of the years behind him—could David have understood that a maid, if you love her, needs wooing with a desperate seriousness and a desperate gaiety—he would have been less interested to-day in the making of charred posts for John Hirst's turkey-pen.

Priscilla, meanwhile, was wandering up the bridle-track

with Reuben Gaunt, and the little, plain-featured man with the wild eyes was talking to her—talk being his prime work in life for lack of better—and telling her of the countries he had seen, the busy streets, the things remote from Garth's quiet high-road.

Like cloudland drifting before a merry wind, the old life went receding from Priscilla of the Good Intent. The street of Garth grew dull; the singing of a farm-hand, as he strode up the hilly field in front of them, was so much noise in a rustic bauble-shop. Reuben Gaunt's plain face, his little body, receded too, and only his wild eyes were left—the eyes that looked into hers and reflected, so she thought, the world beyond Garth village.

Billy the Fool, had he been in this quiet lane, would have been finding the first wild strawberry bloom, or another blackbird's nest; but Priscilla, who had loved such things aforetime, was looking far beyond them now.

"You had seen so many countries, and there were more to see. Yet you came back to Garth," said Priscilla, suddenly.

They had halted at the gate that opened on the field-track to Good Intent, and the girl was leaning with her arms upon the topmost bar. The long and quiet glance she gave her companion was childish in its wonderment.

"Yes—to stay, I doubt. 'Tis free and pleasant to go roaming; but a man grows tired of earning his bread as best he can. I've been a jockey, a trainer, a gold-miner—a saloon-keeper, Lord help me, for one whole year—and all seemed to leave me as poor as it found me, Priscilla."

It was a little sign of the new days, but a clear one, that the girl's pride was content with his half-tender, half-easy use of her name. She did not call him Mr. Gaunt, but avoided any name when speaking to him.

"But you had the life—the life." Her voice was almost passionate. "You did not see the same hills every day, and churn the butter whenever Thursday came, and milk the cattle o' nights and mornings, from spring's beginning to winter's end."

"No, Cilla—yet, somehow, when the old folk died and left me Marshlands, and word came to me that the snug property was mine, I longed for the home-fields—longed to settle down."

Reuben was sincere in this, so far as his way of life allowed him to be sincere in anything. He was glad to be home again, glad to revisit nooks and corners which he had known in boyhood. Even the wanderers need their rest sometimes, and this man with the queer, wild eyes was fonder of Garth village than he had guessed.

"I must take a wife, Priscilla, now that I have something to keep her on," he went on, leaning against the gate-post and stroking his upper lip. "Marshlands will never thrive unless it has a mistress."

Priscilla looked straight in front of her, with a heedlessness that angered Gaunt. Keen-witted as he was, he should have known that Yeoman Hirst's daughter was not one to be wooed at the end of two weeks and a day.

"Yes, 'twill need a mistress," she said indifferently.

Her thoughts were all of the new lands that Gaunt had opened to her fancy, and she would have answered, had she been asked the reason of her interest in Reuben, that he was the bringer of stirring news into the round of her life at Garth.

Gaunt was silent for awhile; wooing had sped so easily with him in times past that contempt or opposition ruffled him.

"Suppose you choose my wife for me, Cilla?" he said at last, with would-be playfulness. "Fair or dark is she, and can she manage a dairy and a roomy house?"

"I had not thought of it," said Priscilla, turning her candid eyes on him again. "'Tis for you to settle such grave questions, I should think."

Her laughter hurt him afresh; and, while he was seeking for a way to meet rebuffs he little liked, John Hirst came up the road. Hirst was not one to scowl; but his thick brows came together when he reached the top of the rise and saw these two together.

"Crossing homeward by the fields, Priscilla?" he cried, in a voice that startled them like thunder out of a tranquil sky. "Well, so am I, and we'll just gang together, lassie."

"Morning, Mr. Hirst," said Gaunt, soon as he had recovered from his surprise.

"Morning, Mr. Gaunt," answered the other gruffly, opening the gate. "Come, Priscilla—we'll go arm-in-arm, as your mother came from kirk with me more years ago than I remember."

Priscilla felt a big hand grasp her arm, and found herself, with no time for a good-bye to Reuben, moving quickly up the field-path at her father's side.

"Well?" said the farmer, presently.

Priscilla did not answer, but released her arm, and set a little distance between them as they crossed the fields. She was angry that her father had shown discourtesy—a thing uncommon with him—to the man who had laid strange, vivid colours on the palette of her fancy.

"Oh, you're out of temper with your dad," said Hirst, a big laugh forcing its way, willy-nilly, through his disquiet. "So was your mother, over and over again, before I brought her safely to kirk—and after, may be. Harken to me, little lass. Oldish men are foolish men, they say, but I don't hold with that." He stole a look at his daughter's face, and found rebellion there. "'Tis as old as the hills, lass, this tale of what to do, and what not to do," he went on, his voice quite gentle on the sudden. "Two folk leaning over a gate—a lad and a lass—and no harm done, perhaps. I did it myself, when your mother was slim as you, and I was courting her. But ye want the right lad and the right lass, Cilla, for that sort of gate-over-leaning."

Priscilla was troubled; for the years had taught her that Yeoman Hirst could never so subdue his voice unless he were deeply moved.

"Father, 'tis so perplexing," she said, taking his arm again in obedience to a friendship that was like no other in Garth village, save that between the blacksmith and

his crony. "I do not like to see you disdain Reuben Gaunt."

"And why, if I might ask?"

"Because there's something bigger than Garth and its grey street."

"Something lesser, too, I reckon. Go on, lassie. I felt the same myself once, and tried t'other thing, and came back in great content to Garth. I once——"

"The world beyond, father!" she broke in, with one of those passionate gusts that were apt to surprise folk who thought her even-tempered and reserved.

"Ay—a small world, Cilla," chuckled John Hirst.

"Yet *you* longed for it once—father, you know how we have sat on Sabbath evenings in the brink-fields, and watched the sun go down, and played at seeing lakes and rivers and steep mountains in the clouds. 'Tis the same with me now. Reuben Gaunt has talked of strange cities, strange countries, lying out beyond the hills yonder—and, oh, I want to get to them!"

"Reuben Gaunt *would* talk that sort of trash!" said Hirst, the strength and the stubbornness of the man showing plainly. "A here-to-day-and-gone-to-morrow man, is Reuben, whether ye like to hear me say it or no. Cities and countries are there, over beyond Sharprise? Well, then, they're men and women in them; and men and women have been much the same since Adam's time, I take it. You'd find naught different to Garth, Priscilla—but ye'd miss the homely hills, and the clover-fields, and the look of Eller Brook when spring is making both banks yellow."

Priscilla, because in her heart of hearts she was disposed to think her father right, was bent all the more, in her present mood, on being out of sympathy with him.

"I should like to see them—should like to judge for myself, father, as you and Reuben Gaunt have done."

John Hirst had said his say, and now was minded to smooth the rough edges, as good-tempered men are apt to be when they have hurt a woman.

"You shall do, then," he said, drawing her to him. "Only choose a likelier comrade for the journey, lass, when the time comes for leaving Good Intent."

They had reached the hedge which Hirst and his men had been laying on the morning when Reuben Gaunt came afresh into Priscilla's life. Trim and low it stretched, the strokes of the billhook showing yellow between the green, primal budding of the thorns.

"Good work, yond, though I say it myself," muttered Farmer Hirst.

"Yes, good work, father," the girl answered absently.

She was not thinking of the thorn-hedge. Her father's "Choose a likelier comrade for the journey," meant in all kindness and desire to warn her, had cleared her outlook suddenly. Reuben Gaunt had looked love enough in these two weeks to have lasted another man a year, but she had disdained to acknowledge the meaning of his glances. Priscilla—even to herself—seldom lost that habit of drawing maiden skirts away from men when they showed a disposition to intrude; but this morning she was forced to see the matter in its true perspective. Words dropped by Reuben, as if haphazard, recurred to her. He was no longer the scarcely-seen interpreter of worlds beyond her reach; he grew on the sudden to be the man who had seen these lands beyond, and she wondered if that wild look in his eyes were the mirror of something gallant and good to look upon.

The girl was so silent and so grave that her father twitted her good-naturedly. "Day-dreams, eh, lass? They come in spring, I've noticed—even to us old folk who should know better."

"They may be dreams," she said slowly—"or they may come true, father, like a fairy-tale."

Reuben Gaunt, meanwhile, was smarting under a sense of foolishness. Priscilla had laughed at him. The farmer had sent him about his business as if he were a hind.

"I get queer welcomes," he said, watching father and daughter move up the fields. It seems it's naught at all to

own Garth's biggest house and richest lands. Garth is a bit like Billy the Fool—likes or dislikes at sight, and always did, however good a man's coat is."

Reuben was admitting unconsciously that his experience of the bigger world had led him to expect a welcome according to his station, rather than his merits. He turned fretfully across the fields—in all his movements and his way of taking life he suggested something of a child's perverseness, as if his body had aged, but not his soul.

He halted when he came to the first stile. His pride was smarting; his love for Priscilla—which touched already the random good in him—was rendered barren for the moment by that one girl's laugh of hers. Small wonder that this man—who, after all, was as God made him, and therefore to be pitied somewhat—had never caught the fancy of the forthright villagers of Garth. He was too big in his own eyes, too eager to see insult where only friendly raillery was meant; and so he could not stand against a real insult, such as Farmer Hirst had given him just now. Angry, unstable as his namesake, he leaned over the stile and watched the patient fields, where the sunlight glistened on the clean, new blades of grass. Far up the pastures, a glint of limestone caught the sun and showed a track which, years ago, before he left Garth village, had been a wooing-trail for him.

"I'll go and see Ghyll Farm again," he said, following a new whim.

It was one of the big moments of Gaunt's life, had he but known it. Yet he seemed to guess as little of it as the wind which, like himself, was turned by any hill that met it in its passage. He crossed the high-road, and climbed the further stile, and went up the track that led him to Ghyll Farm; and he whistled as he went, and moved with an eager step which folk, less versed in the ways of Reuben than the villagers of Garth, would have thought full of purpose.

The farm stood high up on the rise where the pasture-fields ran into the moor and lost themselves, and Reuben,

seeing the rough, black outline of it a half-mile ahead, began to think of other days.

As if in answer to his thoughts, a big, strapping lass came up from the shallow dingle that cut the moor in two. She carried a basket of eggs on her arm, and she moved with a lithe, free swing that was almost insolent in its strength.

Gaunt forgot Priscilla, forgot her father's insult. The worse . . . in him stepped forth, triumphant and uncaring as the girl who came to meet him.

"Why, 'tis you, Peggy?" said Gaunt, touching his cap, but not lifting it with the courtesy which exasperated David the Smith.

"Seems so, Reuben," she answered, setting down her basket and standing with a hand on either shapely hip.

It was not easy to read the look in Peggy's face. There was derision, and rosy pleasure at the meeting, and defiance; and Reuben was daunted a little, for he liked women to go easily upon the rein.

"I'm home again, you see," he said, awkwardly.

"Seems so. I heard you were back two weeks ago, and fancied you were over-proud these days to visit Peggy Mathewson. You've a fine house of your own, and what not, now your folk are dead?"

"I used not to be over-proud to visit you," said Reuben, his eyes catching fire at hers.

"Well, no. But that was years ago, and you were always light to come and go, Reuben. D'ye remember that you left without a good-bye said?" she went on, the grievance of five years coming out with sudden bitterness. "Mother talked to ye, Reuben Gaunt—would have thrashed you, I believe, but for your luck—mother is strong as a man to this day, and that's more than you will ever be."

Reuben's face was like a dog's when he has done amiss, and knows it, and tries to make you understand that he is innocent. Of all the welcomes he had found in Garth, this was the sharpest and most tantalising.

"I had my folk to think of, Peggy. 'Twould have broken father's heart——"

"Oh, ay!" The girl was fine in the strength with which she treated Reuben Gaunt. "You always had somebody's heart to think of, Reuben, when you wanted to run wide and free from trouble. What of me, lad, left here to think of things?"

"You're looking bonnier for the trouble, Peggy, left here or not."

"That's an old trick o' yours, Reuben. Your tongue's ready enough—so is your arm about a lass's waist."

They looked at each other, and Priscilla of the Good Intent was far away from Reuben.

"I could slip an arm about your waist this minute, Peggy."

"Ay—if I'd let you."

She stood away from him, alert, secure, yet with a careless touch of invitation in her glance.

"What is your errand?" he asked, after a pause, pointing to the basket.

"I'm taking a sitting of eggs to Hill End Farm. Folk fight rather shy of mother and me, Reuben, but they seem to know where to come when they want a clutch of Black Minorca eggs."

He fell into step beside her, and Peggy only shrugged her shoulders. It was natural, and like old times, that Gaunt should ask no leave.

"I'm carrying my eggs all in one basket," she said, by and by, after he had helped her over a clumsy stile. "I always did, Reuben, if ye call to mind. 'Tis a failing of the Mathewsons, I've heard tell. They don't look to see if the basket is strong—they just take a daft fancy to the look on 't, and pop the whole clutch in."

"I'm here in Garth to be sneered at," said Gaunt, with sudden passion. "I knew it after the first day or two, Peggy, but I'd looked for something different from you."

"You're always like yourself, Reuben." The girl

looked at him with a quiet, impersonal surprise that was almost pity. "You pour honey into one ear and trust it to run out safely at t'other. I'm the only lass in the world to ye, eh? Those will-o'-wispish eyes of yours are saying it. And I—I like to believe it, though all the time I know you're lying."

Reuben Gaunt took the basket from her arm and set it down; and then he grasped her hands and stood facing her. There was a suddenness and fire about him that the girl liked to see—as she would have liked to find the withies of her egg-basket not quite so slender as they seemed.

"Peggy, I'd thought to find a welcome here at Garth. They're all against me—and I came home again with quiet thoughts enough, God knows. You've failed me, too."

"Did you seek me out, Reuben, till you were tired of better folk?"

"More fool I, then, Peggy."

"It takes you a fortnight to tire, I remember, and two weeks chasing other game, and then you're back again."

The girl laughed suddenly. To know a man to the core of him and find him wanting, and yet to be weak in his hands when he returns—it is a plight which brings women to the borderland where tears meet laughter. And tears are apt to conquer in such a case, though laughter is the safe, abiding road.

Across the ages came the call to the girl's heart—"As a hen gathers her chickens under her wing." She heard the voice. She was stronger than Reuben Gaunt, and knew it, and her pity lay about him like a mother-wing.

"Come close and hither, Reuben. There's naught else will do for ye, 'twould seem," she laughed.

"'Tis five years since I kissed ye, Peggy," he said, by and by.

"Ay," she answered, with a weariness that shamed her big, straight body. "Ay, Reuben. We're as we are made, I reckon, and ye and me are equal fools, each in our own way."

She picked up her basket, and they went along the quiet fields together. The grass was growing under their feet, and a lark was singing to the sun. There was no hint, from lark or greening pastures, that this narrow sheep-track which they followed was leading two folk into idleness.

CHAPTER IV

UNREST

THOUGH spring blew warm and soft from the west, and Garth village saw its trim, quiet gardens blossom out to welcome the young summer, there was unrest about, as if an east wind blew.

Neighbours passed the time of day together, and farmers from the hills came down and stayed to ask if this God's weather-time would last.

"Likely not," was the answer always.

"Ay, likely not," the farmers would agree, though their wholesome, wind-blown faces suggested a more friendly outlook even on the weather.

"Ye're looking glum-like, misters," said Billy the Fool, stepping up one morning to a group of them who stood chatting in Garth. It was a week after Reuben Gaunt had walked across the fields with Peggy Mathewson.

They were not aware of any special gloom, but began to think it must be true if Billy said so. They were men accustomed to see April frosts come to nip the April buds, and therefore they were superstitious; and to them all naturals were "wise."

"And I'll tell ye why," went on the Fool imperturbably. "Te-he! I'll tell ye why, ye wise farm-folk. I'm simple and fond o' my play; but Billy thinks a lot, just whiles and whiles."

These farmer-folk, who could guide a plough, turned all to Billy, who could not guide his own reason. They waited for him to tell the cause of their ailment—an ailment of his

own discovering, not of theirs—as if he had been the village doctor or the village parson, or a combination of the two ; and Billy, finding himself the hero of this springtime gathering in Garth village, laughed vacantly.

“Tell us, Billy,” said a grey old man coaxingly.

“Well, now, I will, seeing ye put it that way.” The natural’s placid smile roved from one to another of the group. “Could tell ye in a twinkling, farmer-folk, if I were minded to.”

“Tuts, you’re minded to,” said the grey old man, coaxing still. “Ye know how the weather sits, and where the first nest’s a-building—surely ye can tell us what’s the matter with Garth village?”

“Ay, I could tell ye,” said Billy the Fool, his smile spreading like quiet sunshine. “’Tis Reuben Gaunt ails Garth. We don’t need the likes o’ he, misters ; he’s, as ye might say, a cuckoo in the wrong nest.”

The men looked at one another. Billy the interpreter had put into words for them a vague unrest that had been with them during these past weeks. They had felt as if the grey village was itself no longer ; they had remembered Gaunt’s record before he left them, and the peace that followed his long wanderings abroad. And now, at a word from Billy, they understood these matters.

“Hadn’t ye thought of it afore?” asked Billy, tranquilly. “Knew it myself the first day I set eyes on Reuben Gaunt. *Te-he!* Ye’re fearful wise and terrible hard in the head-piece, misters, but ’tis soft Billy has to guide ye time and time.”

“To be sure, lad—to be sure. How are we to mend Garth, then?”

“Well, I never had money myself—not to speak of,” chuckled Billy. “It spoils folk’s lives and bothers ’em, so I’ve heard tell. They can’t lie under a hedgerow on June nights and hear the birds a-twittering them to sleep. Must be prisoned in a great big bed, must folk wi’ money, and have a great big roof sitting down on them. Not for

Fool Billy, thank ye, that sort o' smothered life! But ye who've got money, misters—ye might do a service to Garth village. Ye might just take your shovels and a big sack, each of ye, and ye might spade your money into t' sack."

A friendly smile passed from one to another of the farmers. Billy the Dreamer had stepped in front of Billy the Wise Fool, and they waited for a jest. There was a fine, free suggestion of untold wealth about the lad's talk of a shovel and a sack that appealed to their humour. For they had tended, all of them, the niggard fields.

"Then ye'd bring your sacks o' gold," went on the natural—his face was so solemn and so sly that none could guess whether or not he knew that he was jesting—"and ye'd pour your gold out right along the roadway here, and Reuben Gaunt would never see that the daffy-down-dillies were fuller of sunshine than the gold that strewed Garth Street."

"To be sure he wouldn't," said the grey old man. His tone suggested the quietness of a man who sees a moorland trout spreading dark fins in a pool, and moves warily to tickle him out on to the bank.

"Ye see," went on Billy, with his inscrutable, large air, "ye see, ye might put it to him this way. 'Reuben Gaunt,' ye'd say—or 'Mister Reuben Gaunt,' seeing he owns land—'silly boy Gaunt,' ye'd say, 'just look at all this shovelled gold along Garth Street.' And he'd answer, 'What o' that?' And ye'd answer back, 'Silly boy Gaunt,' ye'd say, 'there's a line of gold from here to Elm Tree Inn. 'Tis yours for asking,' ye'd say, 'if only ye'll shift out o' Garth.'"

A great laugh went up. These farmers, not greedy of money by nature, but fond of it, as most north-born people are, saw the slow humour of that trail of gold which ended at the Elm Tree Inn.

"And what when Reuben Gaunt had quitted, Billy?" asked one.

Billy the Fool took out a black and antique pipe before

replying. There were half a dozen pouches waiting for him on the instant, and he filled from the first offered—Priscilla's father's, as it chanced—and borrowed a match. Billy the Fool was always borrowing from his neighbours, and thrived on it.

"Well, look ye here, neighbour-folk," he said, puffing long trails of smoke into the sunlit quiet of Garth. "I reckon there'd be spring a-coming in when Reuben Gaunt had gone. Don't know myself, misters, but that's what Billy the Fool has to say to ye wise folk."

They left him by and by, one or two of them patting him affectionately on the shoulder, and went down the street in twos and threes. It chanced to be market-day in Shepston, as any dweller on the fells could have told, seeing so many farmers in Garth Street at this hour of a busy springtime morning.

"Slow and wise is Billy," said one to the other as they walked between the limestone wall on one hand, the budding hedgerow on the other.

"Ay, knows a lot. Only lacks the trick o' letting out all he knows, or we'd be wiser, Daniel, us folk in Garth."

Billy the Fool meanwhile leaned placidly against the grindstone which stood at the road-edge just this side of Widow Lister's cottage. The grindstone had been out of work these many years, and the lichens gave it a mellow dignity such as sits on old men after their labour is done, and well done, and the resting-time has come. If you had asked the lovers of Garth village to name their friendliest landmark, they would have said at once, "Why, th' old grindstone. Have leaned against it many a time, and talked right good sense, on summer's evenings."

Billy was not talking now. One could not have said whether he were thinking even, so imperturbably he watched the smoke from his pipe curl up into the blue and tranquil air. Yet, just as he had been the interpreter of Garth's unrest not long ago, he was the interpreter of spring just now. Like some primeval dweller in the

forests of a younger world, Billy the Fool looked out at nature, and watched the seasons pass him, and knew that weather and fresh air were relatives of his. They pitied him in Garth, as having no kin; yet Billy, had he found words at any time in which to speak of it, could have told them, with that sudden, easy laugh of his, that he had a mother and sister-folk and brothers.

"Might as well be going down-street," he said at last, shaking himself after he had knocked out the ashes from his pipe. "Terrible lad to smoke is Billy, and I feel the need of another pipeful, as a chap might say. I'll go and sit under the old elm tree, and happen a body's body might come along and offer me a fill."

The big tree in the roadway, fronting the inn to which it gave its name, was browning fast, in token of green leaves to come. The wide circle of the street here, where three roads met, was shimmering in the sunshine as if new-washed and wholesome.

"Terrible fond of a seat is this plump lad," murmured Billy, sinking carefully into the oaken bench that circled the great elm.

He sat there, empty pipe in mouth, and he watched young April glow upon the inn-front and the further hills behind. Great faith had Billy the Fool, and therefore great tranquillity; and, though he hungered for another pipe, he sat beneath the elm tree, as if tobacco fell from the skies like dew.

As he waited, noting lazily for the twentieth time that the wagtails had returned to Garth and were dusting themselves in the roadway, Reuben Gaunt came down the street. The natural saw him—scented him rather, so it seemed—a hundred yards away; and he shifted the empty pipe from one corner of his mouth to the other, and gripped it with his teeth.

"Hallo, Billy, give you good-day!" said Gaunt, as he came nearer. It was Reuben's way at all times to forget past differences, and to take each day as it came. "An

empty pipe, eh? Well, here's a full pouch at your service."

Billy yearned for another fill and another borrowed match wherewith to light it; and they thought him weak of will 'n Garth, but now he looked over and beyond the tempter.

"Thank ye, no. I've smoked enough for a daft boy's head-piece," he said, with the courtesy which seldom failed him. "I'm watching the springtime gathering over Garth, Mr. Gaunt, and I do seem, as a witless chap might say, to have scant thought for laccy."

"But a right good brew of ale?" suggested Gaunt, nodding at the grey and newly pointed inn-front. Like a child, Reuben was always most eager to have his way when thwarted. "A right good brew of ale, Billy? You like it, so they say, and have a head to stand it, too."

A second and an equal temptation came to Billy the Fool. He was silent for awhile, and turned the matter round about in that queer mind of his.

"Thank ye, no, Mr. Gaunt," he said at last, with desperate sobriety. "I'm busy as can be with thinking o' Miss Good Intent. She wouldn't like to see either of us drinking ale at this hour of a spring morning."

Gaunt took the thrust good-humouredly, nodded, and passed on, leaving Billy to watch the inn with wistful expectation. Reuben swung down the street, then turned into the lane that led to Good Intent. He knew that John Hirst would be at Shepston-market, and was sure therefore of his welcome at the farm. He did not get as far as the house, however, for Priscilla was standing in the homecroft as he came through the stile. From sheer frolic she had donned a sun-bonnet, pretending that this April sunshine was over-warm to bear uncovered. The bonnet was pink, and her simple gown was lavender-blue, and she looked, to Gaunt's eyes, the trimmest and the bonniest maid that he had seen in all his travels.

She was feeding a noisy multitude of hens and turkeys,

and it was pleasant to see how carefully the bigger birds refrained from stealing from the fowls—nay, left the tit-bits to them often, and showed altogether the behaviour of a big, good-tempered dog towards a small and fussy one.

It was the turkey-cock that first warned Priscilla of Gaunt's approach. The "prideful devil," as Billy the Fool had called him, was proving his right to the title in good earnest. His tail was spread, his wattle grew and grew until the head of him was crimson as a wild-rose berry; and he made towards Gaunt with little steps that in their fretfulness and self-importance suggested comedy.

Priscilla turned to learn the reason of this outbreak, and her eyes met Reuben's. A delicate flush, a look of pleasure in the girl's candid face, was Gaunt's welcome—a greeting which John Hirst would have understood had he been there.

"Good-day," she said sedately, and turned to feed her birds again.

Gaunt laughed bitterly. "Do you see the turkey-cock's welcome, Cilla? All the male folk of Garth seem out of humour with me somehow."

It was another sign of the new days which Reuben had ushered into Garth, that Priscilla of the Good Intent did not resent the shortened name which few but her father had been privileged to use till now.

"You are out of heart with life," she said, scattering the last of the food abroad and turning to meet his glance again.

"Nay, life's out of heart with me, Cilla. They seem to think I'm lying, these Garth folk, when I tell them I'd be glad to be here again among the old home-fields, if only they would let me."

The man was sincere. It was a dangerous gift of his, this habit of speaking what was truth for the moment, though it had no quality of strength and purpose behind it.

It was a dangerous gift of his, too, that women were compelled, when near him, to feel an odd, protective instinct. Peggy Mathewson had felt the motherhood of

life rise up and cloud her judgment as she walked with Reuben a week ago through the sunlit fields; and now Priscilla of the Good Intent was feeling pity touch her.

"'Tis a bad habit," she said, moving a little closer to him, "this being out of heart with life, Reuben"—forgetting that she had vowed to call him Mr. Gaunt perpetually. "There's enough and to spare of gladness, and we must just search for it when times go ill. Shame on you, to go grumbling when spring is warming all the countryside!"

She was not thinking for the moment of those fairy seas and lands which Gaunt had painted for her. In this quiet field, with the turkeys and the fowls about her, she was answering the prime instinct of all human life—to better a sad man's outlook on the world by spoken word, and, if need were, by that touch of hand on hand which she had disdained.

"Cilla," said Gaunt, with sudden eagerness, "Cilla, have you never thought of wedlock?"

The girl withdrew and put a hand to her skirt of lavender-blue, as if by instinct, and looked at the distant hills.

"I seldom think of it," she answered crisply. "The farm and the dairy-work are enough for me."

"Are they, Cilla? What of the beyond lands, then? I thought there was nothing less would please you."

Priscilla only smiled with the dainty aloofness that angered Reuben and enticed him.

"'Tis April," she said, "and I'm entitled to my whims, like the weather. Besides, I met Billy the Fool in the lane yestreen, and he was showing other pictures to me."

"And what did he show you, Cilla?" asked the other, after turning to cry "*Gobble-di-gobble-di-gobble*" to the turkey-cock, and provoking a hot answer.

"The first wild-strawberry bloom, the first throstle's nest, the first April look of Sharprise—things as old and dear as the hills. Your foreign lands grow misty, Reuben,

somehow, now I'm in love with Garth again. Billy the Fool had ever that trick—to make us wise in spite of ourselves."

Reuben paced up and down in a restless way he had; then he stopped and looked at Priscilla of the Good Intent, and in his eyes there was the mischief of a partial truth.

"Those beyond-places will haunt you, Cilla, all the same, and I could take you to them."

The girl was silent for awhile, and then she drew her lavender-blue skirt more closely round her.

"Ay, so you could; but, Reuben, I prefer to stay in Garth with father. I've enough to do in a day, and am happy in it. Hark, ye! The throistle yonder is singing his throat dry. Did you ever hear sweeter music, Reuben?"

Billy the Fool meanwhile sat on the bench that fronted Elm Tree Inn. He had waited, with his inimitable faith and patience, for a fill of tobacco and a half-pint of ale to drop from the skies; and his faith had been justified, for down the road from his forge came David the Smith.

"You look sulky-like," said David, laying his bag of tools beside his crony and sitting near to him.

"Nay, I never do that. 'Tis not good for this right wholesome world to look sulky. I was thinking, David, and thinking makes a daft-witted chap have fearsome aches and pains in his inward parts, as a daft-witted chap might say."

David the Smith gave out his big, rolling laugh as he clapped Billy on the back.

"Guess what's a-going wrong with thee, lad. You've an empty pipe, I see."

"Ay. And I'm empty o' matches, too," said Billy, his face like Sharprise Hill with the April look of expectation on it.

"Empty in other ways, too," he added, after he had filled his rakish pipe and lit it. "I'm terrible in need of a sup o' summat, David. Reuben Gaunt came by this way awhile since and offered me what ye might call body-warmth, and

I couldn't seem to stomach it—nay, I couldn't, David the Smith, not how he'd try to pour it down my windpipe."

"So Gaunt's been down to the village to-day?" snapped David. "Pretends to be a farmer, yet doesn't go on farmward shanks to Shepston market come Thursday every week."

"No, he wouldn't," said the other slowly, as he pulled eagerly at his pipe. "Mister Reuben Gaunt is not by way of farming, as I look on and see ye busy folk a-farming, like. He does it for play, like Billy the Fool."

David rarely lost his temper, and still more rarely did he seek expression for his feelings in strong language; but now he was silent for a moment, thinking of his love for Priscilla, fearing Gaunt's love of her; and a sudden cry escaped him.

"Damn Reuben Gaunt, and the first day he set eyes on Garth again!" he said.

"Shouldn't swear, David the Smith," put in the other sily. "Parson do say, whenever he stoops to talk to the likes o' me, that folks who swear go to a fearful dry and over-warm spot. He's wiser than ye or me, is parson, David, and we should listen to him, we."

"Then he should tell us," responded David, grimly, "why deep-set troubles come to a man, Billy the Fool, without his earning them, and why a man must swear at times, or else do something worse."

"Ay, 'tis a terrible makeshift sort of a world—terrible makeshift, David; but yet, in a manner of speaking and as a body might say, yet understand, it suits Billy the Fool right well. There's always fields and hedgerows, eh?"

It was not till late, as Billy and he moved up the street toward his forge, that a strange fancy came to David Blake. He remembered, as a lad, the stir and gossip there had been in Garth nigh twenty years ago. A company of strolling players had come to Garth, had played there to wondering rustics in the barn at the end of the village, and had gone their way—all save one, who stayed behind

and found her way, late on a mirk and windy night, as far as Marshlands. She was found dead at the gate of the homestead on the morrow, and a year-old child was crying at her breast. None ever knew the rights of the tale; but old Gaunt of Marshlands was known as the wildest roysterer in the dale, and, though some disbelieved the story that the woman had come to him for help and that he had deliberately turned her back, to die in the rain and cold, yet all believed that Gaunt was father to the child.

The child was Billy the Fool, adopted and well cared for by Garth—a village bairn, the plaything and the property of all kindly folk. And Reuben was the acknowledged son and successor to old Gaunt at Marshlands.

"'Tis odd," muttered David the Smith often and often, as he worked at the anvil and glanced at Billy. For he remembered the consistent hatred shown by the natural toward Reuben Gaunt.

CHAPTER V

A PIGEON-PIE

GHYLL FARM was in the parish of Garth, but it lay so high on the moor-edge, and so far away from the sheltered village, that it was reckoned out of bounds. Moreover, Widow Mathewson, who lived there with her daughter Peggy, was accounted something of a heathen even in the charitable judgment of Garth folk.

These two, mother and daughter, lived alone at Ghyll, doing their own farm work—even to scything of the one small meadow when haytime came. They went never at all to church or chapel; they were distant in their greetings when they chanced at rare intervals to meet their neighbours; they were pagan, self-reliant and alone, and it was said that Peggy was wild as the widow, and never a stiver to choose between them.

Widow Mathewson was at her door this morning, watching the lambs play antics with their mothers in the fields below. A big-boned woman and tall, and her face showed that lined, hard look of weather which women rarely wear.

She ceased to watch the lambs by and by, and her eyes wandered to the track that led to Garth—the track that glistened like a living thing beneath the April sun. Far down the slope of the path a slight, dark speck appeared, growing each moment till it showed itself as a man's figure. The man was walking fast, steep as the field-track was, and Widow Mathewson laughed quietly when he came near enough to show the eagerness of every stride.

She left the doorway, and went and rested her arms on the rail that guarded the potato-patch from the fields. And she waited, with a look on her face such as David Blake had worn, three days ago, when he swore outright in the presence of daft-witted Billy.

The man was so full of his own thoughts that he did not see Widow Mathewson until the path had brought him to within a score yards of her garden railing; and then, for shame's sake, he had to come forward with a jauntiness that was obviously ill-assumed.

"I'm here to give you good-day," he said. "After five years, 'tis only neighbourly to call."

"You're here to see Peggy, and know it, Reuben Gaunt. We didn't part such friends five years since that you need come trying to smooth me down with lies."

Gaunt reddened, and flicked a hazel-switch uneasily against his riding-breeches.

"Lies go terrible smooth into a woman's ear when she loves ye," went on the other; "but they're puffs o' wind when she loathes the sight of a man."

"I find plenty of pleasant home-comings," said Gaunt, stung into bitterness.

"We're not pleasant, ye see. Have to meet the weather, we, and rear our crops. You may be Mr. Reuben Gaunt of Marshlands, or you may be son to the devil that fathered ye—'tis all one to me. I like a man, or I don't, and I never set eyes on one I liked less than ye."

"I'll be saying good morning, then," said Reuben, with an uneasy laugh.

"Nay, but ye won't—not just yet awhile. Ye came here to daften my lass Peggy again, so ye thought. Well, ye're here, as it chances, to listen to sense from Peggy's mother. It runs in our family, Reuben Gaunt, for the women to love undersized and weakly men. We're over-strong, may be, and must have some fretful babby or other to dandle, same as big men like to do. Peggy's father was just such a one as you in his time, and I loved him. Ay,

I cried when I buried him, and I cry still o' nights sometimes when I wake and find an empty bed. Yet I looked down on him in life, Reuben Gaunt, as I look down on you. Queer oddments go to make up a woman."

"That's true, mother," came Peggy's low, rich voice. She had returned from a haphazard scramble on the moor, and had listened to half the talk with a simplicity that came of pagan habits.

"Get indoors, Peggy!" snapped her mother, turning sharply. "D'ye want to catch the plague, or what, that ye go breathing the same air as Reuben Gaunt?"

But Peggy did not move. Perhaps the closest bond between these two, strong mother and strong daughter, was the knowledge that they feared each other not at all.

"We're made up of oddments, ye and me, mother. Ay, 'tis a good word, that. I happen to love Reuben Gaunt, as you loved father once—and ye'd better just leave us to it."

Widow Mathewson smiled on them both—a smile that was bitter in its avowal of defeat, in its hapless faith that what would be, would be, and that the would-be must be bad.

"Sorrow along, Peggy," she said. "If ye choose to make your bed of thistles, 'tis not I that ought to blame you. Good-day, Reuben Gaunt."

The quiet dignity of her farewell troubled Gaunt more than all her previous outspokenness had done. He felt like a country clown in presence of a lady, and he hated Widow Mathewson.

"Ah, well, now, mother's hard on ye, and always was," said Peggy, touching the man's arm with a certain fierce tenderness.

He answered nothing, and Peggy went through the wicket, and moved slowly across the field, knowing that he would follow.

"You seem to think the same, from what you said just now," he muttered, falling into step with her. He was minded to return in dudgeon by the path which had brought

him up to Ghyll, but the girl's pliable, trim look disarmed him.

"I said that I loved you, Reuben Gaunt. Whether I trust ye or not, and am a fool for my pains to love where I can't place trust, is not for me to ask. Oh, pity of me!" Her shoulders opened to the wind, and she laughed at herself and him. "To have a mind to think with, Reuben, and to live near the fresh air and the wind, and yet to let your heart go loving, spite of all. I've trained a few dogs in my time, Reuben. Wish I could give myself some wholesome thrashings, and be quit of you for good and all!"

Gaunt was no fool, just as he was no wise man. It seemed the wind had blown from the four quarters at one time when he was born into a usually steady world. He was no fool; and, though he smarted still from Widow Mathewson's contempt, he was quick enough to see that Peggy had some special grievance of her own.

"What's amiss, lass?" he asked.

"This much is amiss—that now and then I find myself in Garth, and now and then I hear gossip of Miss Good Intent. She's bonnie and slim to look at, I own, and worth perhaps a score or two of you, Reuben; but I'm not concerned with what she is or what she's not—I've no mind to share you with another."

"What are they saying, then, in Garth?" He stooped to pluck an early daisy, and Peggy's mouth twitched with a sort of scornful humour. Reuben Gaunt was not wont to take a tender interest in wild flowers.

"They are saying," she went on, "that you're seen over-often with Priscilla Hirst; they say that you've a look in your face, when with her, that they remember from old days. I remember it, for that matter."

They had come to the little wood where water ran between the budding hazels, where catkins yielded to the fluttering wind. Reuben stopped, and put an arm about her waist, and the remembered look was in his eyes.

"Look ye, lass, and see if I'm true or not," he said.

Peggy laughed openly—it was her protest against this renewed, yet long discarded, half-belief in him. "Miss Good Intent has said 'no' to you, eh?" she murmured, with that bewildering frankness which attached to her mother and herself. "Shame to come begging crumbs, when you wanted something better."

She knew by his eyes that her guess was a true one—that he had come, inconstant as the wind, to find one playground when another was denied him. He was the same Reuben Gaunt who five years since had all but broken her courage and her heart. And, because he was the same, she felt the old love return, and let her reason go.

"Mother's right, Reuben," she said. "'Tis in our family to love a man o'er keenly, and listen to his lies, and go on caring all the more. There's one thing puzzles me, all the same."

He waited, perplexed as he often was by women's moods, though by this time he should have known their every turn.

"Nay, only this, Reuben"—there was pathos in the quietness of the deep, strong voice—"I was young and not used to heartache when it first came. I'm five years older, lad, and I've suffered and come through it. Seems it has taught me little. Seems I might as well be weaker than ye, instead of stronger. 'Tis a bit of a muddle, Reuben, this life o' wind and rain and turmoil."

David the Smith, meanwhile, was walking up the lane to Good Intent. He did not need to watch Yeoman Hirst well out of Garth before he stole into the fold, for he was welcome there at all times.

David had a desperate business on hand. He had thought much of Priscilla during these last days; and this meant only that he had halted more often in his work of smithying, or what not, to wonder how the lass would best be made happy.

It was while he was sharpening a billhook on the

grindstone in his smithy-yard that David had got his adventure well in hand.

"Never thought of that before," he said, running his thumb along the blade to test its edge. "I'm a rum chap enough, God knows ; but, if it comes to a tussle 'twixt me and Reuben Gaunt—well, I'm stronger in the thews than he, and maybe I'm what ye call steadier-like."

So David, with plain faith in stronger thews and steadier morals, laid down the bill-hook, and bade his faithful ally sleep on guard ; and he strode along the quiet street of Garth, and turned into the lane that led to Good Intent.

He found Priscilla in the kitchen, her arms bared above her elbows. She was making a pigeon-pie, and David thought, as he saw her in the sunlight, that no man need ask for a bonnier sight than Garth could give him.

"I've something to say to ye, Priscilla," was his greeting.

David could never do any business save in his own way. If he were driving a stake into the ground, he took up his mallet and hit it plumb ; if he were asked to shoe a horse, he did not stay for talk, but brought the nag to reason as soon as he could and clapped the shoe on it. So now he proposed, in great simplicity, to deal with this more hazardous business.

"Something to say ?" said the other, sily. "'Tis not often you have that, David."

He did not heed. If he had been resolute at that gloaming tide when Priscilla had first waited for him to speak, when Gaunt had shadowed the mistal-door, it might have proved better, or worse, for David the Smith ; but now it was too late. "The time of day was behind him," as they say in Garth, but he did not know it.

"Yes, I've something to say," he went on doggedly. "When you were a lile slip of a lass, and when you were maiden-grown, Priscilla, I loved you just the same. I'm busy to-day, Cilla, but I broke off to ask if you would wed me. Could aught be plainer, now ?"

The girl rested her hands on the table, and looked at

David Blake. The white of the flour-paste lay in the shapely furrows of her arms. She was silent, for surprise had given way to deeper feelings. It had been easy to disdain Reuben Gaunt, when he came wooing at a few weeks' end ; but David's love was a thing to be reckoned with, a big, protecting force which had been about her for so long that it seemed fixed and righteous as Sharprise Hill—a part of this gracious world of Garth, a part of the comeliness and peace which brooded over its grey old fells, its grey and fragrant street.

Priscilla of the Good Intent had little in common with Peggy Mathewson ; but they were alike in this, that each looked out at life with candour and with little coquetry.

Cilla glanced with troubled eyes at David—glanced wistfully and anxiously.

"It will never be, David ; yet, if you asked me why, I could not tell you. I know you love me. I know that Garth would seem lone and empty if you left it. What ails me, David ? Tell me, and I'll right it, if I can."

But David the Smith knew nothing of such matters. He had made his last effort—a hard one—and looked for a plain answer, yes or no. Even yet, had he known how to come nearer to the girl, instead of standing, very big and very bashful as he swung from one foot to the other—even yet he might have scattered those fantastic mists which Reuben Gaunt had woven about Priscilla's life.

"There's no two ways, Priscilla," he said slowly. "Either ye'll have me and make life a different matter ; or ye won't, and I'll trust ye to find a likelier mate."

"I'm not for mating—father has need of me—oh, David, David, I'm so fond of you, so loth to hurt you. Won't you understand ? I'm fond of you, but 'tis not just love—'tis not just love, David !"

Her voice was trembling, and she stooped to finger the loose scraps of dough that littered the baking-board.

David stood motionless. The boy's look, that is in every lover's face, was gone. Not till now—now, when

he had greatly dared and greatly lost—did he fully know what stake he had in Cilla's love ; and his face was hard and stern.

"You were kind to hear me out, little lass," he said at last. "Ay, ye were always kind and comely. And I've lost ye. Perhaps I may go on keeping watch and ward about ye, as I always did? 'Tis little I can do in that way, but I've always liked to think I was watch-dog, like, ever since as a child ye *would* loiter round about the pool in Eller Beck, and I feared ye'd tumble in."

"Ah, hush, David! You've been too good, and I am not strong enough for Garth. I dream too many dreams"—with a pitiful attempt to smile—"and I've lost the way of the love I might have had for you."

"So you're at Good Intent, David—and welcome!" shouted Yeoman Hirst, tramping in from the fields across the threshold of the sunlit doorway.

It was a jest in Garth that John Hirst, though no way deaf himself, fancied all other folk were so.

Priscilla dropped her eyes and took up the rolling-pin again.

"Thank ye," said David, with a quietness that contrasted oddly with the other's roar. "Ay, I'm here passing the time of day with Priscilla. I must be off by that token, for there's work crying out for me at the forge yonder."

"Always was, so long as I remember. Outrageous man to be doing somewhat, is David—fair outrageous. Tuts! Ye'll stay for a bite and sup with us? Cilla has a pigeon-pie in the making, I see. Always said, I, that a pigeon-pie served two good usages—keeps a lile lass out of mischief while she's making it, and keeps her menfolk strong to work for her after they've tucked it safe away."

David shook his head. "I've too much on hand, and thank ye, farmer. Will come another day, if ye're so good as to think of naming it again. Good-day, Priscilla."

With a nod to them both he was off, and John Hirst chuckled weightily. "Fair gluttonous for labour, eh,

Cilla?" he said. "David the Smith would do better if he took more while-times o' rest, say I."

Priscilla was busier with her task than the time of day demanded; and her father, getting no answer, came round to her side of the table, and pinched her cheek, and vatched the dough of the pie-crust as she rolled it into shape—watched with the eye of faith, and trusted it would be brown and wholesome by half-past twelve o'clock, or thereby.

"The lile lass is busy, too," he laughed, in what was meant to be a gentle tone of raillery. "Busy with your hands, Cilla—and busy awhile since with your eyes, I reckon, when David came a-courting."

She glanced up sharply, and again the farmer laughed, as if a half-gale had got into his throat. "Nay, I overheard nothing, Cilla," he said. "I only looked at David's face, and I gathered ye'd said 'no.' Second thoughts are best, lile lass, second thoughts are best. Never saw a properer man than David myself, and I'm reckoned a judge of cattle."

"Ay—but he's a man—and I'm a woman, father," she said, fitting the dough to the edge of the pie-bowl.

"Just so—but, two-legged or four, we're chips of the old gnarled tree o' life. Choose a likely lad, Cilla—and, for the Lord's sake, get that pie into the oven. Have been up the fields since seven of the clock, and hunger's time-piece says 'tis dinner-hour, or ought to be."

John Hirst went out again, for he had a virile wisdom and a knowledge of the time to leave a woman when he had spoken truth to her.

David the Smith, meanwhile, had gone down the lane. He could never wed Priscilla now—for Yea and Nay seemed always absolute to him—but at least he had concealed his heart-sickness from Yeoman Hirst. So do the younger men think always, not understanding that with age there comes a clearer understanding of the passions which grey-beards view as onlookers.

David was of the men who snatch their courage from the thick of despair, ride out with it, and count it the more precious because it is riddled through and through, like a banner well baptised by fire. So he held his head high, and swung staunchly down the lane.

Three usual folk he met as he came into Garth Street and crossed to his smithy. They noted nothing out of the common in his cheery greeting; but Billy the Fool, rousing himself from sleep beside the fire, knew by instinct what his comrade's humour was.

"You're terrible gloomy, David the Smith," he said, as he stretched his idle shoulders. "What's amiss with us all, now spring's come into Garth?"

"Life," snapped David, and picked up his tools, abandoned for Priscilla's sake. "Just life, Fool Billy—and I'd no real quarrel with it, that I know of, before to-day."

"Comes of being wise," said the other tranquilly. "Try being a Fool Billy—just try it, David, and lie in a hedge-bottom when 'tis seasonable, and hear the chirrup o' the world."

David fingered his tools. They steadied him at all times, and his patient love for them was returned in full, at this moment of his direst sorrow. He felt his heart grow lighter—less heavy, rather—as he handled them.

"Humming a tune, are you?" said Billy presently, with an approving nod. "Terrible fool's trick, that, and comforting. Shows ye're getting upsides wi' yourself, as a body might say."

"Getting upsides with myself?" growled David the Smith. "Have got to, or what's the use o' life?"

CHAPTER VI.

PUCK THE SPRITE.

RUMOUR was not less busy in Garth than elsewhere where folk congregate, and Reuben Gaunt gave food for it these days. His rules of conduct, or the lack of them, were a constant puzzle; his wish to play the idler, when by rights he should have been a working yeoman, and proud of the title, perplexed them; moreover, he could be brave and generous on occasion, and this fitted ill with their notions of a scamp.

Ne'er-do-wells, pure and simple, they could understand. There were two or three of the breed in Garth, but these consistently were idle at the best, and in dire mischief at the worst.

Gaunt was a puzzle to them, and therefore a whetstone for their tongues. Then, too, he was fond of horses, and master of them; fond of dogs, and knowledgeable as regards their ways; and these were qualities that Garth village liked to see in any man.

Just now, indeed, it was his love of horseflesh that was talked of most in Garth. They said that his patrimony was rich, as a yeoman counted riches, but not enough to let him hand over the direction of his lands to a bailiff—as he had already done—while he himself rode idly up and down the countryside, or followed race-meetings.

"Gallop to the devil, eh, as many a lad has done before him?" one would say to the other.

"Ay. A horse, I reckon, is the best thing ever made—barring a good human here and there," the other would

answer ; "but a horse is the devil and all when ye get a man o'er-fond of him."

Another whisper was abroad in Garth, one remote altogether from bankruptcy or horseflesh. They said that Priscilla of the Good Intent was not herself of late, that Reuben Gaunt was seen too often in her company.

"Too good for the likes o' yon—eh, Silas Faweather?" one would say.

"Ay, a mile and a half too good ; but what's to be has got to be, and lasses are mostly fools i' the springtime of their life. Not just such fools a lile bit later, when the fairies' pranks are over-with, and bairns come, and a sackless husband still runs daft-wit, following what he calls his pleasure."

Cilla knew her own mind as little, this mid-April time, as Gaunt himself. The man's plausible, deft homage when he met her ; his seeming forgetfulness of the day when he had wanted her to marry him, and she had answered with a laugh ; his low, quiet voice as he talked of glamourous countries far away—all these were fast making Reuben the centre of her thoughts. She missed him if he failed to come, though she might draw aloof and set a barrier between them when he did approach her.

Yet David the Smith was about Garth Street each day, and his nearness, though she did not guess as much, steadied Priscilla. Beneath all else there was an assured and pleasant liking for David, a dependence on his judgment, a looking-out for him, as if her eyes needed shading against the glare of life, when troubles came too thickly on her. For this reason she seemed nowadays to play with Reuben Gaunt, though she was wondering only what her own heart had to say to her.

News seldom travelled from Ghyll Farm to Garth. The house lay so far up the borders of the moor, and Widow Mathewson had discouraged intercourse so long, that you might have travelled through the village, and asked by the way for news of those at Ghyll, and yet have learned no

tidings at the end of all. Had the widow been ill, or Peggy dying, days might well have passed before they knew in Garth what had chanced at the lone and churlish farmstead. So they guessed nothing nowadays of Reuben's new infatuation for Peggy Mathewson; had they guessed it, Cilla of the Good Intent would have had a whisper, kindly and wholesome, dropped into her ear.

She heard no rumour, would have disdained such had it come her way. Clean of thought and heart, Priscilla wondered if she loved Reuben Gaunt just well enough to marry him. She never questioned his good faith. It was hers to say no or yes—spoiled queen of the little village as she was—and she asked herself, over and over again, with Puritan self-question, if this light of the glamoured lands were not a will-o'-the-wisp such as danced across the upland marshes. When she saw David the Smith, and spoke with him, it was sure that marshlights flickered about her fancied love for Gaunt. Then Reuben would come, soft of speech and pliable, and David would seem a big and country lad upon the sudden.

Spring, meanwhile, flushed into splendour round about the gardens of Garth Street, and in the woods, and along the length of mossy lane-banks. A foam of green-stuff feathered the larches and the rowans, the dog-rose bushes and the blackthorns. The low, sequestered dingle hiding Eller Beck was banked so thick with primroses on either side that it seemed a thousand golden eyes looked up, winking the dew away.

The weather held, with playful showers that were like a child's tears, gusty and soon over. Seldom in the memory of Garth had the pomp and circumstance of the young summer proceeded with so few mischances. There had been no sudden snow to hinder the lambs new-dropped about the pastures; there had been no frost o' nights; and the throistles sang their clarion-note as if no winter's wind had ever piped a harsher tune about the grey fell-village.

At eight of one of these spring mornings—the wind

light from the south, and the sun playing bo-peep with fleecy clouds—Priscilla of the Good Intent stood waiting under the elm-tree which long ago had given its name to the village inn. She had been fitful lately in her temper, and Yeoman Hirst, thinking a day's holiday would be "good for the like lass," had asked her to do some farming business for him at Keta's Well, high up the valley.

So Oilla waited, a trim and slender figure, near the old elm-tree. The public vehicle by which the dales-folk went from Shepston to Keta's Well—a vehicle half coach, half omnibus—halted here to take up passengers. The coach was over-due, as it happened, and, while she waited, Priscilla saw Reuben Gaunt ride down the street.

Reuben saw her, too, but pretended that his mare was fidgeting upon the rein. He pulled her sharply back at the entry to the stable-yard, plucked her forward again, and disappeared.

"He does not see me," murmured Priscilla of the Good Intent. "Light to come and light to go, is Reuben Gaunt, they say—but surely——"

Gaunt had found the ostler in the inn-yard. "Dick," he said, "has the mail gone by?"

"Not yet, sir. She's late this morning, sir, and that's rare for Will the Driver."

All ostlers were reverent towards Reuben Gaunt. He smelt of dogs and horses always; his clothes were cut to the self-same shape, and he had their gospel of gone-yesterday and come-to-morrow.

"I thought I'd missed it. Stable the mare, Dick. I'll be back by the down mail."

Gaunt strolled out into the highway. He had guessed, seeing Priscilla under the elm-tree with a basket in her hands, that she was waiting for the coach. A while since he had been sure that he meant to ride to a pigeon-match three miles away; he was sure now that he must go to Keta's Well.

"Good-day, Priscilla," he said, with quiet surprise.

"Good-day," she answered, the wild rose coming to her cheeks. "You did not see me, Mr. Gaunt, when you rode into the inn-yard?"

The ready lie came to Reuben's tongue. Like water slipping down between the ferny streamways of the hills, he sought only the quiet pools—sought them at any hazard of the rocks that met his course.

"I was riding for the mail, and thought I'd missed it."

The flush deepened. Cilla could not help it. "You're bound for Keta's Well?"

"I've business there. And you?"

"I've business, too. Father is busy in the fields, and has asked me to do some bargaining for him up yonder."

"You're too bonnie and slim-to-see for bargaining, Cilla," said Reuben.

"Am I?" she laughed, with frank disdain of flattery. "I can bargain well, Mr. Gaunt, when needs must. Ask father."

The irony of life rose up and laughed at her, in the midst of this hearty springtime weather. If ever she had needed a hard heart, and a clear knowledge of what barter meant, she needed them now. She had a great gift to bestow, or to withhold—the gift which lies in the hand of every woman once in a lifetime—and yet the spring, and Gaunt's whimsical, gay air, bewildered all her judgment.

"You always flout me nowadays, Cilla," he said.

Gaunt was strangely like the dogs he loved. Careless of the past, careless of the future, he longed always for the instant pleasure, and, if he were thwarted, assumed a helpless face of innocence. It seemed that the sense of guilt was left out of him at birth; thwartings by the way surprised him, when another man would have admitted that he got no more than his deserts.

Cilla, too, was strangely unlike herself this morning. She remembered that her father, and all the men-folk of Garth, were hard on Reuben. She looked at his devil-may-care and pleading face, and decided impulsively that they were wrong.

"I do not flout you willingly," she answered, her candid eyes looking straight into Reuben's own. "They are not fair to you in Garth here, and I am sorry."

Across their talk came the patter of horse-hoofs, and the coach swung merrily round the corner and stopped with a flourish at the inn-door.

"Good-morning, Miss Priscilla!" said Will the Driver, lifting his whip with a brave salute. Cilla was his favourite passenger, and he had seen her, with the quick eye of friendship, as soon as he turned the corner.

He got down to help the ostler with the buckets; for his team of three were mettled horses, and Garth was the baiting-stage on their journey up to Keta's Well, and Will would never admit that the business could be rightly done unless he bore a hand in it himself.

There were seats for eight at the top of the coach, but Reuben Gaunt, though all were empty this morning, did not choose to sit beside the driver. He handed Priscilla, by way of the yellow-painted wheel, into the rearmost seat and clambered up beside her.

"Not on horseback this morning, Mr. Gaunt?" said the driver, who had a word for every one and knew each daleman's habits.

"No; there's good in changing, Will," laughed the other, "if 'tis only out of one coat into another. A fine spring morning, this, for sitting on a seat instead of on the top of a horse's temper."

"Ay, my cattle, too, are feeling spring come back into their bones. Terrible wild to handle this morning, Mr. Gaunt. You'll soon be up at Keta's Well, I fancy." He gathered the reins into his hands, looked round with a cheery nod to the knot of idlers gathered about the inn, and was starting forward when Widow Lister ran crying down the high-road.

"Here, Will! Nay, lad, you wouldn't surely have gone and left my bit of a basket behind?"

"How was I to know you were coming?" said Will,

pulling up and surveying the woman's apple-red face—a face brimming over just now with jollity.

"You should have guessed," she went on briskly. "And me a lone widow, too—and to have run myself all out o' breath, at my age, just to catch a young man who does naught for his living save sit on a seat and let himself be carried."

A placid titter went up from the onlookers.

"Right!" cried Will. "Hand up your basket, widow. Where must I set it down?"

"There! Not to guess a simple matter like that! Ye've to leave it at the first stile on your right after you've passed through Rakesgill. Mrs. Fletcher it's for, and she's wiser than you were a minute since, Will, for she knows it's coming. Oh, and, Will," she added, her red cheeks dimpling with roguery, "it goes from one poor body to another, does this bit of a basket, and happen ye wouldn't charge for it at either end."

"Wouldn't I?" said Will. "Want me to take it as my own private baggage, eh?"

"There's only some roots of double-daisy in it, and a few plants of bachelors' buttons, and a little round Garth cheese. Mrs. Fletcher's fond, as you might say, of flowers and cheese; 'tis all by way of a present to another lone widow woman—and she my own sister."

"Some folk thrive on loneliness," laughed Will, putting the basket under the seat. "All right, widow! I'll leave it on the stile, and we'll trust Robin Goodfellow to pay."

He started forward, got his team into the straight, then turned round to Oilla. "By your leave, Miss Priscilla, there's some o' your kind have longish tongues. I'm proud of being to time, and here we've wasted five whole minutes. No man likes bringing cattle home in a lather, but these beauties will have to go. We were late already."

"They'll stand it, Will," said Gaunt. "I've not met your like for getting a horse into shape."

Will the Driver showed what his team could do. Like

a true dalesman, he was proud of his trade, and Gaunt had found a sure way to his ear. Between the white and sunlit limestone walls they swung, and between hedgerows where the bird-cherry showed its glossy leaves. Little tinkling streams flew by them; and, up above the roadway hedges or the roadway walls, the clean, sweet fells raked forward to a blue and fleecy sky.

To Priscilla it was a journey into the outskirts of that Beyond which tempted and enthralled her. The sunshine, the quick going of the coach, the quiet interest which her companion aroused—all helped to round off this adventure into the heart of spring. They stopped at Rakesgill, to set down the scanty mail and a few odd packages, and to take up a passenger on the box-seat. As at Garth, the villagers had met to see the mail in, and Cilla watched the group, and listened to their banter, with a sense that the freshness of the growing year was blowing round their old-time jests.

Widow Fletcher was waiting at the stile—thrust on their right hand, as they trotted out of Rakesgill—and it was plain, from her red, plump cheeks and her cheery air, that she was own sister to Widow Lister of Garth.

"Nothing to pay?" she asked, as she took the basket into her hands.

"No. Widows thrive well in these parts—they wear rowan-berry luck in their cheeks," said Will, flicking his whip.

"Comes of losing men-folk's company, Will—though thank ye for the basket."

"Men-folk are always wrong, 'twould seem, Widow Fletcher. Come of listening to a woman in those far-off Bible-times."

"Ay, Adam blamed Eve, and Eve's been blaming Adam ever since. So we're quits, I reckon."

"Tongues are longer than time," said Will, with a happy laugh. "I've naught to do with Eve and Adam, widow, but I have to be at Keta's Well come twelve o'clock."

"Like a man," said the widow to herself, as she watched the coach go swiftly in the van of the light, smooth April dust. "Like a man, to be worsted by a lone widow's tongue, and then to flick his horses up and drive away."

Will the Driver checked his team again, a mile further up the road, to take another parcel from underneath the roomy driving-seat. This he laid on the top of a gate that opened on a farm-track.

"Only a ham for Farmer Joyce," he said, with the trick he had of laughing over his shoulder at passengers behind. "Seems he's not just hungry yet, or he'd be here for it."

Cilla turned to Gaunt, as they rattled forward. "It seems odd that you should be going to Keta's Well to-day. I go so seldom, and you would be riding, surely, if you were not lazy?"

"You want to know my business there?"

"No. Why should I need to know it? Perhaps you are going to buy another horse."

"I'll tell you my business on the way home, Cilla, because then I'll know whether it is speeding well or not."

Cilla's eyes rested lightly on his, then danced away to the grey, far hills. The girl was a madcap this morning, and deserved to be; for she had many working days, but enjoyed few spendthrift holidays, with a green world and warm spring winds about her.

"As you will," she answered. "For my part, I have father's work to do."

With a flourish, as if he carried great personages—Will was never so happy as when driving Cilla of the Good Intent—the mail drew up at Keta's Well. There was an inn on the left hand of the grey, wide roadway, another on the right, and the two were so friendly, as it chanced, that Will the Driver baited and took his dinner at either hostelry upon alternate days.

Priscilla took Gaunt's hand daintily, and clambered down into the roadway.

"We say good-bye here?" she murmured, with a shy flush.

"Yes," he answered, "until Will is ready to drive us home again."

"Yet 'tis only a good walk to Garth for one as strong as you."

"I am lazy to-day, Cilla, as you told me. Don't forget the mail goes back at five o'clock."

The men all said it was a devil's trick of Gaunt's to know just when to stay and when to leave; the women, most of them, found the trick praiseworthy; and Reuben, had you asked him, would have laughed, like the man-child he was, and have said that he deserved neither praise nor blame, since he was as he was made. At any rate, he had judged wisely now in guessing that Priscilla would shrink from sharing a meal with him.

Cilla dined sparingly at the inn on the left hand of the road, where the landlady mothered her always after a brisk, impersonal fashion. Reuben dined at leisure in the right-hand inn, and sauntered out a half-hour after Cilla—punctilious always, even in the midst of a holiday, when business was to be done—had crossed the street and reached the grey bridle-way that wound up to the fell-top farms.

When Gaunt came out at last, he wandered up the fields. He had found business here at Keta's Well, and his business was to think of Priscilla and to long for her. He saw a clump of primroses peep out at him from a sheltered dingle, and plucked a bunch; they were cool and fragrant, and he thought again of Cilla. The larks sang overhead, and curlews were shrilling wide about the fields. And now from a watered hollow, as he passed it, a heron clattered noisily from out the trees; and again, as he looked up some dancing streamway, a kingfisher would dart, with a flash of blue that startled him, across the sunlight; and everywhere upon the hills the sheep were bleating happily, calling their lambs to the udders.

Few dalesmen could have withstood this day which

seemed to hold, in the hollow of the quiet sky's arch, all that was lusty, and good to hear and see, and sweet to smell. This was the land's answer to those who said that her winter-time was bleak and bitter; and out from some forgotten Eden the west wind seemed to blow.

Reuben Gaunt withstood few pleasures at any time, and now he swung completely into friendship with this land which no remembrance of other countries could ever belittle to him. He felt again the throb of boyhood, of boyhood's keen, unspoiled delights. Good impulses rose and carried healing with them. For this one day he was a good man in his own eyes, and that boded ill for Priscilla, who was going sedately about her business meanwhile, moving from farm to farm with lightness and a happy zest in holidaying which suggested something of the kingfisher.

Gaunt roved the fells, the primitive, strong motherhood of nature crying constantly to him from the pastured slopes, where big and little dots of white against the green showed fine sheep-harvests for the farmers. His heart was big and clean—for this one day—and he thought of Cilla, and she seemed the brave, sweet symbol of this vale of Strathgarth.

He thought, too, of Peggy Mathewson, wild as one of her own moor-birds, and wanting him beside her at this moment. He shook the thought away, and prided himself, God help him, on finding the better man in himself to-day.

Another thought he had—repentance for his sins—and this boded ill again for Cilla of the Good Intent. Repentance heretofore, with Reuben, had been a bird that laid her eggs in another's nest, and left her young to turn out the foster-mother's offspring.

The larks were shrilling all about him. A peewit circled, dropped, and fell, not five yards from him as he stood motionless in dreamland; the bird looked shyly once at him, then dropped her plumed head and went on feeding placidly. So still the man was that a lamb, new-born and guileless, came bleating to inquire what manner of thing he

was ; and the old ewe-mother ran, forgetting that by nature she was timid, and butted Reuben with a quiet, yet warlike pressure.

He woke from his dream, and gave the ewe a playful kick. "Look to your own married life," he laughed, "as I am hoping to look to mine before the year is out."

He glanced at the sun, and guessed that it was after four. Repentance and memory of Peggy Mathewson slipped from him. He strode down the fields ; and, short-statured as he was, and slight of build, he carried a look of bigness with him. It was Reuben's holiday, as it was Priscilla's. The sun shone on him, just or unjust ; he seemed, indeed, to stand apart from himself and his past, a better man.

Priscilla, waiting for the coach, and just five minutes before her time, as her wont was, was surprised by Gaunt's straight, forthright air as he crossed the street of Keta's Well. She had never seen him in the light with which this witching day of April glamourised all the land. Every man was better than he guessed to-day, and every woman comelier ; and down the breeze played Puck the Sprite, laughing at all wayfarers as he laid the cobwebs on their eyes.

"How has your business sped, Cilla ?" asked Reuben.

"Well," she answered, lifting shy eyes to his. "And yours ?"

"Well, also, Cilla. I have found what I came to Keta's Well to seek."

They plighted their troth—neither altogether understanding the long glance—there in the grey road of Keta's Well. Reuben's eyes caught honesty from Cilla's, and she thought the mirror truthful ; and by-and-by Will the Driver came thundering down the road. Will's face, ruddy about the clear blue eyes, seemed to hark back to days when Viking forbears raided Strathgarth and settled there.

"Up to time, in spite of women's tongues," he laughed, bringing his team to a halt. "Lord help us drivers, Miss

Priscilla. Widow Fletcher will be waiting for me, too, if I know her—'tis her twice-a-day time for gossip."

Gaunt spoke little on the homeward journey, and Priscilla was strangely silent, too. Passengers climbed up into the coach, or scrambled down, but these two heeded little of what went on about them. There were stoppages, at this village and at that, to take up the mails which Will the Driver stuffed into the sack that grew bulkier and bulkier as they went along. From hill-top farmsteads lasses ran down, bare-headed and cleanly outlined against the background of the fells, to give Will another letter for his sack, or another parcel to be hidden underneath the box-seat. All was life and movement on the Garth high-road, but two who travelled on it were thinking altogether of each other.

"I gathered these primroses for you, Cilla," said Reuben, breaking one of their long silences.

"Was that all your business up at Keta's Well?" The girl's laugh was low and happy.

"I think it was."

She glanced at him with that wild-bird look which her father had noted and distrusted weeks ago. Then she looked out again at the fell-tops and the pastures, which swung past on either hand in wide half-circles. The magical, blue sunset-time was spreading light fingers already about the hills and dimpled fields.

Gaunt did not know himself. Good thoughts came to him like a mystery as deep as this veil of evening that was clothing all the land. For this one day he loved Priscilla as a better man might do; he lacked only the courage to be true to another, at any hazard of his present happiness. For Reuben Gaunt had never learned, or had never cared to learn, that honesty is ever and ever like the trim, grey walls of Strathgarth—foundationed well, well built, and proof against the winds of winter-tide. He loved Priscilla; that was all; and good love, for the moment, was his pleasure.

"Ah, I guessed I should see you here, Widow Fletcher," the driver's voice broke in. "What can I do for you this time, in a littlish way?"

The plump-cheeked woman was standing at the gate as if she had never left it since the morning. She was laughing, too, as if her face had kept its dimples all the day—a guess that came near to truth.

"Nay, I only want you to take the basket back. Lone widows are lone widows, aren't they, Will?"

"Ay, we're fair blanketed with them up hereabouts. They swarm like bees in June about this road to Garth. Terrible pranksome cattle, widows and horses, and terrible hard to deal with."

"We're lonely, Will, though. Widows are always sorrowful and lonely. You're thinking of charging for the carry of this basket home to Garth? Men-folk are so selfish."

Will the Driver laughed, as Yeoman Hirst might have laughed, giving innocent villagers the notion that thunder was springing from a clear and fleecy sky.

"I'm selfish this way, Widow—that I've only a minute more to waste in talk. Hand up your basket. 'Tis just another trifle to the load."

Mrs. Fletcher let the team start forward, after giving the basket into safe keeping; then ran down the road with an agility surprising for her years.

"Will! Will the Driver!" she called.

He pulled up with a sort of weary haste. "Ay?" he asked over his shoulder.

"You'll be passing here to-morrow? Well, you might just call at Mason's little shop in Garth and bring me a half-pound of tea. There's number three painted on the canister, Will—but Mason will know the number, if you say 'tis for me. Poor widows need their comforts in this life, and tea soothes a body, like."

Will started forward in earnest this time, and addressed the empty road in front of him, where the leafing hedge on

the right hand was casting plumper shadows than it had thrown since last its twigs were bare.

"Runs in the family," he said, flicking an early fly from the leader's back. "Widow Fletcher here, and Widow Lister yonder at Garth—they always want you to do something for them, and always ask you to do it after you've fairly started. There's a trade in widowhood up hereabouts, I fancy. Gee-up, Captain, will ye?" he broke off, touching the leader more sharply with his whip. "You were born of the male kind, Captain, and so was I, and we've got to make up for lost time 'twixt here and Garth."

"Oilla, shall we get down?" said Gaunt, suddenly. "We're nearing Willow Beck Bar, and 'tis summerlike for a saunter home by the fields."

Priscilla looked again at the fella, and smelt the sweet of the breeze as it passed her. It was three miles from the grey little toll-house to Good Intent, and there was a suggestion of mystery and adventure in this finish to a holiday.

"Why, yes," she answered simply; "I've seven packages with me, but Will the Driver will see that they get safe to Good Intent."

They got down at the squat, quiet toll-bar, with its windows fronting, like a bee's eyes, on all sides of its face. They went through the gate together, and Will the Driver watched them for a moment as they turned into the path that followed the slight stream's course.

"See her parcels safely 'livered at Good Intent?" he said to himself. "Would do more for the lile lass, I. Pity she seems so friendly-like with Mr. Gaunt. Should keep to dogs and horses, Mr. Gaunt—he understands 'em. Now, Captain, will you know I'm late on the road? You've got to make the whole team work."

CHAPTER VII

THE HOMING TRACK

THEY followed the winding stream-track, Gaunt and Cilla of the Good Intent. And now it was that the day, receding in the west, grew beautiful as it had never been at height of noon. Strange purples shadowed all the distant fells, while near at hand the pasture-fields moved in green, tranquil softness to the heath above.

"You are quiet, Cilla," said the other by-and-by.

"Quiet? I was listening to the curlews."

Not the words, but the girl's low, passionate voice told what the curlews meant to her. Now, when the silences crept, dumb of feet, all down the furrows of the land, it was the curlews only that were loud. Wide about Sharp-rise Hill they called, and along the raking backs of Hilda Fell, and across and over the ordered lines of grey walls, green fields, and scanty woods that were Garth Valley. They would not let folk rest, but went crying, crying, fretting, fretting, while Sharp-rise wore his ruddy sunset-mantle, and Garth Crag, away to the east, was donning her grey nightcap.

Garth folk, in exile, remember always how the curlews fret and cry about the fells. The sob in the bird's call—the sadness that begins so quietly, and afterwards goes shuddering out across the gloaming's stillness—they are the interpreters of music, sad enough, but understood and loved. In the daytime, complaining of the sheep; near dusk, the curlew's melancholy; folk who have known and heard these things will lie o' nights amid the welter of the

tropics, and call the clear sounds back to mind. Reuben Gaunt, random as he was, had done the same, and Cilla's earnestness came home to him to-night.

"They're sad birds, though, when all is said," he answered.

"Sad? Ay, and so is life, or was meant to be, if we could only see it so."

Priscilla—whether the curlews had caused her this dismay or not—felt restless, ill at ease, as if a new world were opening before her and she was unprepared for it.

"Ay, but was it meant to be?" said Gaunt. He was helping her to cross a strip of marshy field, and his grasp tightened on her arm. "Suppose it was meant just for loving?"

The candour in her eyes bewildered Reuben for a moment, as she freed herself and sprang lightly to the drier ground, and stood facing him, her hands clasped in front of her.

"Yes, if it *were* love, Reuben." She was no longer proud, or self-secure. It was rather as if she reached out in search of guidance, feeling the throb of new, quick impulses, as if she asked Gaunt to tell her, out of his ripper wisdom, whether it were good or ill to follow these same impulses.

There was flattery in this to Reuben. He felt big, protective, and again he yielded to a half-truth—that Cilla had shown him the good way of love.

"Lile lass," he said—and Garth Valley knows no softer endearment than those words—"lile lass, I'm asking you to marry me. There's a good house waiting for you at Marshlands, if you'll only come to it."

She thrust her clasped hands outward, as if to ward off an evil thought. "What does the house matter, Reuben?" she said, with another gust of that passion which few suspected in Cilla of the Good Intent. "D'ye think I would wed for house and gear? I'm asking, Reuben, whether love is going to keep the hearthstone warm?"

"Try, and see, Cilla," he broke in quietly.

The gloaming deepened over the magical, quiet fields. Sharpshin was a clear-cut wedge of purple now, pointing up into an amber sky, and Hilda Fell showed as a dark-blue, jagged line, with a tuft of crimson cloud lying over it like the tattered banner of day's defeated armies. Low and roving wide, deep and tremulous, the curlew's voice seemed to tell only of mystery and sorrow.

They had been silent, awed by the night, by the gift it had brought them. On the sudden Reuben Gaunt set his arms about the girl, and drew her to him; and Cilla of the Good Intent, not knowing why, lay there and did not heed. And then again, not knowing why, she stood away, and her face was quivering because she tried to check her sobs.

"Why, lile lass, you're crying!" cried Gaunt, roused from his happiness.

At all times brave, at all times candid as the sky, Priscilla checked her tears, but not the sobs just yet. "I was never kissed before—and, Reuben—all my pride is gone."

Gaunt laughed easily. He did not guess how like a child was Cilla, how like a braver woman, too, than he deserved.

"Because I want you down at Marshlands, Cilla?"

"Because the old life is gone, and I fear the new one. I was never one to fear—yet now—Reuben, you'll be kind and true? I can never give my heart at twice."

"Don't ask you to, lile lass," he answered cheerily. "Once is good enough for me, seeing you've chosen Reuben Gaunt."

Another silence fell on them, broken only by the low complaining of the curlews. Then Cilla, smiling and sobbing both, looked Reuben in the face again.

"It should be no time to be afraid? Tell me again 'tis happiness."

"To our lives' end," said Gaunt, and meant it at the moment.

They were nearing the track to Good Intent, and their

footsteps lagged. The Beyond, which Cilla had thought to lie out and away behind the fells, had come to Garth, it seemed, to-night; for each detail of this homely land she knew from childhood took on a warm, new aspect. This was her first love-time, and life held unsuspected melodies.

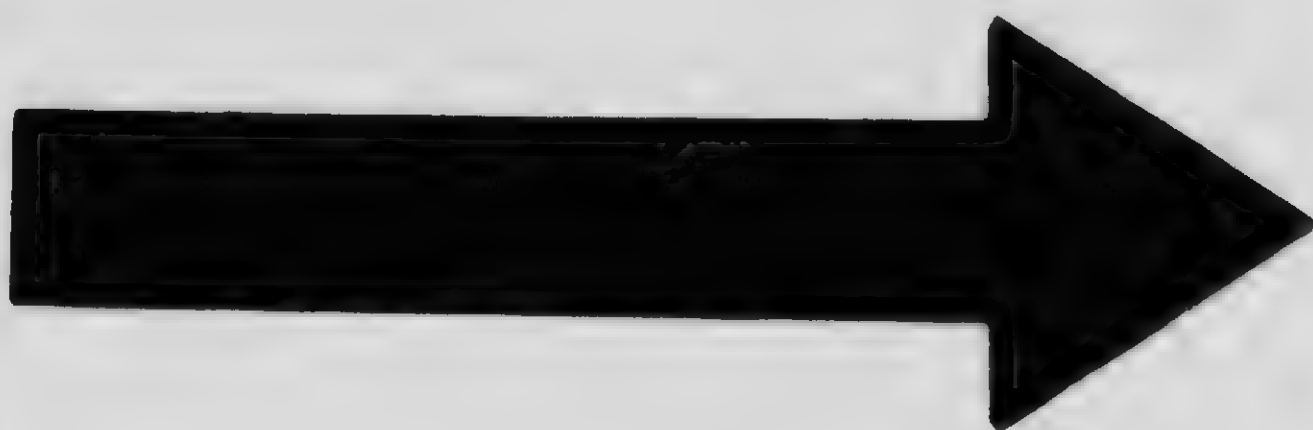
"Cilla," whispered Gaunt, "you're making a new man of me. You——"

He halted in his speech, and the girl, had she glanced at him, would have seen perplexity and helpless anger in his face; but she was looking ahead with dreamy eyes—looking so far ahead that she scarcely saw the strapping lass, limber and well-featured, who was coming up the stream-track.

Gaunt had seen her, though, and was asking himself why Peggy Mathewson had chosen this one hour for a saunter up the water-side. As they drew near, his anger changed to fear; for Peggy was apt to be outspoken, and might ruin with a word this new and better life which, to his fancy, opened out before him.

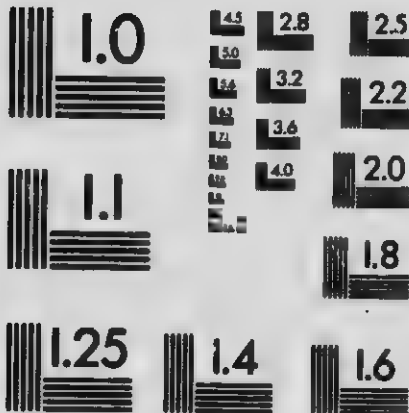
Banned by Garth village as she was, there was no man in it who could say that this lass from Ghyll Farm was anything but comely; more than one, indeed, had sought her company, in a diffident and non-committal way, to the anger of their women-folk. Yet Peggy had never shown her beauty to the full, as she did now in the moment of her tribulation. She had seen Gaunt before he was aware that she was near, and had needed no second glance to convince her that a lover and his lass came wandering down the stream; and, having lived a country life, she knew that there was no way of dealing with a nettle save to grasp it. For that reason she straightened her firm, tall body—which had drooped a little because, until she turned the bend of the stream, she had been thinking kindly thoughts of Reuben—and she moved up the stream as if she were over-lady of Garth Valley.

To Gaunt's surprise she took no heed of him, but stayed to pass the time of day with Cilla.



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"Spring's here at last, after the long winter," she said, in the rich voice that even now moved Reuben.

"Here at last, Peggy," answered Priscilla, who banned no one, child or man or woman, whatever folk might say of them. "You've chosen the best time of day for your saunter, too."

"Likely I have," laughed the other. "I'm courtship-high, Miss Priscilla, as they say in Garth, and my lad's waiting for me somewhere up the stream."

"Well, then, I wish you happiness," said Cilla, out of the warmth of her own glamour-tide. "'Twill be no secret soon, Peggy, that Mr. Gaunt here wants me to marry him some day."

Cilla rarely stayed to measure the wisdom of her words, and never when her heart was glad, because then, of all times, it was right to give sunshine out.

Peggy Mathewson winced, recovered as from a blow, and turned to Gaunt with an impassive face.

"Did not see you before, Mr. Gaunt. Miss Priscilla here carries such a bonnie look with her that a body wants to see no farther, like. You might have chosen worse."

With a nod to Priscilla she went her way, and Cilla turned to look after her and to admire the bold, free swing of limbs and body.

"There's something odd about her, Reuben. Yet why they give the Mathewsons so bad a name, I could never guess."

"Nor I," said the other lamely.

"'Tis not as though they did aught amiss, save live outlandishly away from Garth and show little care for company. They're an odd couple, mother and daughter both; but they carry themselves as if they had a pride in life, and even father owns that they know how to treat their cattle and how to rake the hay crop in. That's much for father to say, who thinks that women's place is in the dairy and the house-place."

"I was thinking of you, Cilla," broke in Reuben,

desperately. "Why spoil the night with talk of Peggy Mathewson?"

"Nay, I know not. The girl has always puzzled me. I could have liked her, and been friendly, Reuben, but she seems always like the east wind, that will be friends with none."

Peggy herself, meanwhile, had carried her trouble bravely till she was sure of being out of sight. Then she stumbled to the nearest gate, and looked out at the grey, soft darkening of the hills. Sharpshin was an ill-defined, blue-purple splash across the fellscape now, and the curlew's note waned softer and more soft.

"'Twas to be," murmured Peggy. "Oh, ay, 'twas like as it had to be. The queer thing is, I bear no malice to slim Miss Good Intent. Should hate her, I—yet, if 'twere not she, 'twould be another."

She spoke as if half-stunned; for, though her judgment had foreseen such trouble long ago, her heart had covered up its doubts. She, too, heard the wailing farewell of the curlews to the twilight; but it reminded her only of sad weather on the moor—of wet east winds, with snow behind them, just when the lambing season seemed like to prosper—of frosty labour in the fields of barren harvests.

"He'll break my life in two. Tried hard to, once, did Reuben Gaunt; and now he's home-returned to finish off the brave job, I reckon."

She gathered the remnants of her courage together. With a pitiful defiance she laughed, though a sob broke halfway through the laugh.

"Kept my pride to the end. Told Miss Good Intent I went to meet my lad. Oh, I know Reuben! He'll think of that in awhile, and grow jealous. Pity o' life!" she broke off, straightening herself with sudden passion and flinging out her capable, strong arms with a gesture that was tragic in its impotence. "Women keep crying, crying out to God—if there is one—and asking why men were sent into the world for mischief. And no answer comes,

not if you mucky your knees with going down in the peat to pray for 't. And women go on saying there's no such thing as heart-break ; and men believe 'em, because they daren't do otherwise ; and graves keep being dug, and good lives shovelled under 'em, with a word or two from parson to smooth the sods down. Lord, I wish a few o' the surpliced folk would come to Peggy Mathewson for guidance ! ”

The last silence of the fells came down about the girl. Yet she stood there, not thinking much, but feeling more than weaker folk could have borne. So quiet it grew that the busy travels of the field-mice could be heard, as they pattered through the grass, and the nestling of the lambs against their mother's fleece was a call, almost, across the stillness of the night.

“ I knew all along, and I wouldn't heed,” she whispered to the night. “ I wouldn't heed again, if all were to be done afresh. Yet what he's missed ! God, what the lad has missed ! ”

CHAPTER VIII

PRISCILLA SPEAKS HALF-TRUTH

PRISCILLA forgot Peggy Mathewson soon after they had passed her by. She was thinking of Reuben, sauntering step by step beside her, and of the new, elusive joy there was in these April gloaming-tides which she remembered from her childhood.

As in all joy, there was a corner somewhere, unswept by the cool evening breeze, which harboured distrust of happiness. It was not Reuben she distrusted—for she was one of the brave, simple kind who, once loving, are hard to move from faith; it was not belief in God's ulterior harshness, which is the cold refuge of the weak; it was a doubt of the reality of what she felt, a looking out toward something steadier and more calm.

"Troubled still?" asked Gaunt, recovering quickly from the shock of meeting Peggy, now that all danger from it was over for the present.

"It seems too good, that is all," she answered.

And then he talked to her, as they moved through the quiet after-light and neared the stile that brought them to the croft of Good Intent. He put his love, his hopes of a finer life, his resolutions for the future days, into words that would have moved a harder and more clear-sighted maid than Oilla. He talked once more of foreign lands, and again of this sweet Garth that lay about them, and he twined his love of Oilla through it all like a golden thread.

Priscilla forgot that corner where vague distrust span webs like a spider in a dusky room. Out of her heart she

gave her love to Gaunt ; and, because her heart was full, she needs must laugh.

"Reuben, we've not told father yet."

"No, but we will do soon. What's the thought in your bonnie head, Cilla ?"

"Why, that I must wash my face, for I've been crying. Father is never so tired o' nights but he looks at me at home-coming, and he seems to know if an eyelash lies out o' place."

This side the stile, where they had halted, there was a well-spring for the cattle—a trough of stone, all but hidden long since by the mosses and the ferns that fed greedily upon the water. Priscilla turned her back on him, and, stooping, dipped her kerchief in the well.

"Good night," she said demurely, when she was satisfied that the stains of the night's tumult were removed.

"Ah, but not so quietly, if you please."

So she reached up her face to him ; and then he said he would wait till she was safely home, for even the home-croft held dangers when you loved a maid. And Cilla tripped happily across the darkening grass, and, because she was happy, she turned at the bend of the mistal-yard and hooted like a barn-cwl, to let Reuben know that she was safe.

Gaunt laughed as he turned homeward. He did not follow the wandering line of the stream this time, but took a straight course across the fields—a course that led him, as it chanced, to the gate over which Peggy Mathewson was leaning, still fighting despair as best she might. Her back was turned to him, but even in the dim light Gaunt could not mistake the figure ; he bit his lip impatiently, and wondered if he should pass on and climb the wall a little further up.

"Nay, she would know, though she won't seem to see me now," he muttered. "Best have it out, and have done with it."

He moved quietly to the gate, and laid a hand on her arm. "Peggy——" he began.

She swept his hand away, and turned on him, and Reuben Gaunt, who had seen mainly the softer side of women until now, was awed by the storm that broke about him. She said little; but in her voice, in every movement of her body, there was contempt and loathing.

"Get you home!" she cried, pointing across the grey haze of the fields. "D'ye think I want such as you to come touching me?"

"But, lass——"

"Ay, and *but*, *lass* and *but*, *lass*—and you want to explain, and explain—haven't I learned your tricks and your wheedlesome ways by this time? Little Miss Good Intent is younger to 'em; *she'll* believe ye, maybe."

"We'd best not part in anger," he stammered.

"Hadn't we? 'Tis the only way we are like to part. I'm waiting for my lad, as I told Miss Priscilla just now. He'll *explain* to ye, Reuben Gaunt, if that's what lies in your mind."

The suggestion of physical cowardice—not true of him at any time—stung Gaunt as much as anything the girl had said or left unsaid.

"If that's so, I'll wait for him here with you, Peggy," he said, holding his ground.

For a moment she relented. Gaunt was always showing her glimpses of a certain hardihood and courage which she liked to see in man or woman. Then she remembered Otila, and saw again the look those two had worn as they came down the fields to meet her—came whispering, hand in hand, as if they robbed no woman of her birth-right.

"Will you go?" she cried. "I've done with you, Reuben Gaunt, and you with me!"

"As you like," he said doggedly. "I only wanted to——"

"Ay, to explain! Reuben, I'm old to your tricks."

The tiredness and the scorn of those last words left Gaunt no choice. Without a word, he set a hand on the

top bar of the gate, vaulted it, and passed out into the greyneess of the night.

"He should end that way," said Peggy, looking after him. "Some day he'll take a three-barred gate too many, all in his easy style, and light on his head the farther side."

Tired out with passion, she turned to wander up the stream. And she met her lad, and walked with him; and he was known by the name of heart-break to the few who believe in such old-world superstitions.

Cilla of the Good Intent, meanwhile, after crossing the croft in safety and giving her owl's call to Reuben, had gone indoors. Yeoman Hirst was sitting by the fire—it was rarely so warm in Garth, but what a fire o' nights was pleasant—and he was nursing a long clay pipe in his hand. He had been counting his gains in live stock during this propitious lambing-time; but he looked up quickly as Priscilla entered, and in his glance there was that affection which sees a score of little signs at once.

"You look brave and well, Cilla!" was his greeting. "Got the wind into your cheeks, eh? Now, I do begin to think, spite o' being your father, that you've some claim to be called bonnie, like."

Priscilla was not so happy as she had been a moment since. This steady warmth of greeting seemed out of keeping with the quick, random happiness she had seized by stealth to-night. It had in it something of the security she had missed in Reuben's wooing.

"Ah, shame to go spoiling your own lass, father!" she answered. "And see, you have no horn of ale beside you."

"Not like to have, till you come in. I must be getting old and daft, Cilla, for I cannot rightly taste the wholesome bitter in my evening draught, unless you come and fill it."

She busied herself in filling the horn from the cask of October ale which stood in the outer kitchen. She seemed the same Cilla as of old—capable and gentle, wholesome to look at, careful of a good man's wants; yet until now she

had never known what it meant to hold any but a trifling secret from her father.

"Now, sit ye down, Cilla," said Hirst, after a quiet pull at his ale. "Sit ye down, and tell me all about your day at Keta's Well. I'm in good humour, lass. I've been thinking, while you tarried shamefully, that never was such a lambing-time in Garth. These Scotch ewes are well enough—like 'em best of all, for my part—but they're shy of dropping twins. Seems there's a fairy-wand about. I go to bed o' night, and hear the lark whistle me up next morning, and walk up the pastures—and there's another ewe just twinned. The land's fair white wi' them."

It was Priscilla's unrest that answered, and the words slipped from her unawares. "You're boasting in April, father. I've heard that wise folk never boast till May is out—and seldom then."

The farmer ran his hand along the arm of his high-backed chair, in token of his faith that touching wood was a sure antidote to pride. "There, you're a lile, trim farmer's wife already, Cilla!" he cried. "Wouldn't you trust even such a weather-time as this?"

Cilla thought of to-night's wooing weather, of how little, after all, she trusted it. "I've seen a foot of snow in May, father," she answered.

Hirst gave out that thunder laugh of his which seemed to rattle the pewter on the shelves. "Oh, and have you, maid? How many, then, has your father seen? Never get older that way myself, Cilla—sure as heartsome weather comes, I believe in't like a brother. There may come a storm in May enough to ding the house-walls in, but, come the next soft spring, ye'll find me like a lad again, thinking that lollipops will never end. David is late," he went on. "He promised to be here by now, to talk over a matter of some wheel-axles I want from him, and to join me in a pipe."

"David? Is David coming to night?"

The girl was surprised by her own terror of David's

coming. To hold a secret from her father was bad enough—but to meet David, just to-night—she could not bear it.

"Well, no, it seems he's not," the other answered drily, "or he'd have been here by now, surely. So you've had your frolic, lass, at Keta's Well? And your packages all came up before you, with a message from Will the Driver that you were following on. Likely pranks, these—you finished the day with a gossip, eh? Your mother was the best soul that ever lived, but she always relished a gossip, I remember."

Oilla had taken up some knitting, and bent her head under the pretence that she had dropped a stitch. Her father's trust in her, his kindly banter, the old home-look of everything, were each a separate reproach.

"I walked from Willow Beck Bar, father. The look of the quiet fields tempted me."

"Would have tempted me, too. So long as you picked up no wastrel on the road—but there, that's not your way, lile lass."

If John Hirst had not turned to his horn of ale, he must have seen the discomfiture in the girl's face. She had told him the truth, yet knew that it was half a lie; and the shame of it was bitter to Priscilla of the Good Intent. To be sure, Reuben would come to-morrow, or the morrow after, and have his say, and all would be explained; but this evening there was a barrier between the yeoman and herself, and she was tempted to tell all and have done with it.

David, meanwhile, had not forgotten his promise to Hirst; but on his way to keep it he found himself a half-hour before his time, and, meeting Fiddly Billy in the fields, had good-humouredly joined him in a saunter.

It was Billy's special season, this flood-tide of the spring—the season when he could show many secrets to such folk as loved the hedgerows and the pastures. David, as he went up and down the fields with his boon comrades, had a feigned interest at first in the nests which Billy showed him; for he was thinking of Priscilla. But by-

and-by his interest awoke ; he saw the blackbird's dappled clutch of five, and the wise thrush looking at him as she sat brooding, and the hedge-sparrow's ragged nest, built in the kink of a grey limestone wall and bottomed with blue eggs ; and he felt his boyhood coming back to him.

"Now, there's a wren a-sitting over across yond field," said Billy. "Wouldn't ye come with a body, David, and see yond same?"

"Another day, Billy, another day. I'm due with John Hirst, and must be getting back."

"Well, then, a body must turn when he must turn. There's no denying that, David. I'm going to see the little shy bird a-sitting myself, so I'll bid ye good e'en."

Billy was moving away, after the loose, easy way he had of carrying his great body, when he felt a lack of something, and stopped and turned about.

"Have ye a nill o' baccy on ye, David the Smith?"

"Ay, lad—three, if ye'll take them."

"Nay, I'm only wanting one," said the other, briskly filling his pipe—"and a match, as a body might say."

He lit his pipe, nodded tranquilly at David, and went up the fields. David watched his unhurried stride, the unhurried trail of smoke that drifted in his wake.

"A born smoker, is the lad. Puffs none too fast and none too slow, but fair as if he had 'twixt the and Judgment to finish his 'baccy in. No wonder Billy needs only a match at a time ; yond pipeful will burn away till there isn't a strand o' baccy left in't."

In some dim way, David Blake was aware, long now-days from that bluntness and reserve which, even towards himself, it had been his habit to maintain. In part he was vastly diffident, and in part his days were filled with earnest labour, so that all his life he had feared to indulge what he named "fancy feelings." Yet to-night, as he saw the utter content of Billy the Fool, he was moved to a speculation which, before the spring came in, he would counted dreaminess.

"Will die a lad, yond Fool Billy," he muttered, as the summing-up of his thoughts. "He's the only man of his age in Garth that's got no worries. I'd swop places with Billy, if the chance were gi'en me."

He gave a look at the evening hills, the evening fields, behind him, and for the first time he wondered if Priscilla's refusal of his suit were final. Greatly brave in speculation was David the Smith to-night, and the mere hope that Cilla might find second thoughts—a hope slender as a reed, but real for all that—set a new light in his eyes and a brisker movement in his feet as he stepped out toward Good Intent.

He crossed the high ground overlooking Willow Beck, and as he walked he kept looking constantly into the hollow. So gently the gloaming filtered down the valley's length, like a wide stream of silver-grey—so prayerful and so still the evening was—that a man of harder heart than David might well have found his eyes go seeking peace and finding it.

"She's bonnie, when all's said, is Garth Valley," was his thought; "and here am I, all late for Farmer Hirst."

Suddenly he halted, though wishing to get forward. Through the silver-grey of Garth two figures came; as yet they were no more than outlined against the grey, but David was held by some unhappy intuition, and he needs must stay and watch them at a nearer distance.

Slow, but pitifully sure for David the Smith, their progress was; and soon, though it was too far to know their faces, he knew them by their carriage and their walk. Spring was over in a moment for David, but boyhood was not altogether past, it seemed, for he felt his throat grow big, and his eyes were smarting.

Once, as he watched them, they stopped, came closer still together, and went on again; and over David—whom folk thought slow and cheery, not given to feeling over-much—there passed the bitterness of death.

It was no selfish love he had for Cilla. To see any

man so close to the life lass, whom he had watched over so long, would have been a grief, because he frankly sought her for himself these days; but had the man been honest, clean of his hands, David the Smith would have felt no bitterness, only a self-sorrow that he would not have nursed for long, because such sickliness was foreign to him.

"If it had been any one but Gaunt," he said, "any one in all Stratford save Steuben Gaunt! Lord knows I hate the willowy, slim way of the man, and he'll send Priscilla's happiness abroad—ay, will he, like any ladkin blowing bubbles for a frolic on his mother's doorstep."

He turned away, thinking he could not bear to go to Good Intent to-night. Yet he had promised, and his word, till now, had been good as Queen's coin in the village.

Up and down the fields he wandered. If Cilla were not sure to meet him at Good Intent, he could have gone at once, and covered up his bitterness from Hirst as best he might; but it was nearing dark, and he knew that she would return before the last of nightfall came.

"I cannot bear to see the life lass, and never speak a warning word!" he cried.

Out of the silence presently there came a cry—Priscilla's call to Gaunt, in token that she had crossed the home-croft in safety—and David bent an ear and listened.

"Only a daft old barn-owl," he muttered. "Birds and their ways, and maids and their ways—I'm weary of 'em."

David was unlike himself, and knew it. It was well for growing lads to be peevish at these times, but he was old enough, he had fancied, to have learned common sense. So he squared his shoulders; and his face, in the gathering dusk, wore the look he had when he was driving a stake into the ground or was hammering a horseshoe on the anvil.

"I'll go," he said. "Promises run down the wind, they say, and catch in any hedgerow—but not David's promises to Farmer Hirst. Bless me, and there's a letter in my pocket all the while, and I'd forgotten it!"

He set out in earnest this time for Good Intent, not heeding the beauty of the grey night; and he came to the wicket-gate that opened on the garden at the rear of the farmstead, and went down the five steps leading to the door, and knocked.

"Step in, David!" sounded Hirst's big voice. "I knew you'd come, lad, though I said you wouldn't."

David the Smith opened and went in; and he felt himself forlorn, seeing the look of things within doors. On one side of the hearth, with its back to him, was the hooded chair in which the farmer took his ease at nights; and a rough-coated elbow showing round the corner of the oak, a haze of blue smoke curling up toward the rafters, witnessed to Hirst's presence. On the other side, facing David as he entered, sat Priscilla, her work on her lap, her eyes on the fire that threw quiet, homely patches of ruddy light and sombre shadow round about the room. The farm-dog, Fanny, stretched at full length beside the fender, was too full of dreams to do aught save wag her tail in a feeble way, though she knew that one of her oldest friends had come.

It was home, thought David the Smith; no subtle detail was wanting to complete this picture of fair prosperity and honest ease and fellowship—no detail lacking to save David an added pang. He had been content, till lately, with his work, his freedom, his trim little house with its garden sloping to the stream; to-night he saw only the warm look of Good Intent, and by contrast his life seemed barren and unprofitable. He longed for a lass of his own, and a dog stretched half the length of the ingle-nook, and may be the cry of a bairn as it waked in its mother's arms and fell asleep again.

"Come forrard, lad!" cried the farmer, getting himself out of his chair with a cheerful groan—for he was stiff after the day's work. "There's none so welcome at Good Intent, come late or early. Fanny," he broke off, stirring the dog with his foot, "wilt get thy great body under settle, thou jade, and let a better than thee draw up a chair?"

The dog stretched herself, gave a low growl of protest, looked up at Hirst to learn if he were in earnest. Seeing he was, she turned to David, and put her fore-paws on his chest and licked his face.

"Nay, nay!" said he. "What sort of guest would I be, lass, if I let thee wheedle me after the master had said *under?*"

Fanny had liquid eyes, of a shade and lustre that any woman might have coveted; she lifted them now to David's, in between patient lickings of his face, with surprise that he should turn the cold shoulder on a friend in this way. So it ended—seeing the man's heart was soft and foolish toward all dumb things—in David's bringing a chair up to the hearth, in his taking the dog's brown-black, wistful head into his hands and stroking her muzzle softly.

"Shame on thee, David!" laughed Hirst. "She'll be all spoiled by to-morn, when I want her to round up the sheep on Kittycome Pasture."

"We'll chance it, John. Ay, we'll chance it. Like to feel a dog's head in my hands, I. It seems to hearten a man."

Now that he had met his trouble, had seen Priscilla face to face and conquered the outward signs of heartache, David was almost merry. It had been a desperate venture, this of meeting Cilla so soon; and, now that he was in the thick of it, he felt something of the gaiety which attends on great adventures.

Never had Cilla guessed till now that David Blake could be so light of talk. The sobriety which she associated with him was gone. Quick lights of humour played about his face. He had stories at command—droll tales which Will the Driver had told him of the road, sly anecdotes concerning the foibles of his neighbour-folk. He was guarding a heartache bravely.

Once, in a pause of the talk, he looked at Cilla, and found her eyes resting on him with strange intentness. She was thinking that the helping hand-grip she had sought not

long ago, when she resisted and yet longed for Gaunt's caresses, was David's own. When she saw that he had caught the glance, and was trying to read it, she took up her sewing, and hoped the colour in her cheeks would be counted to the firelight's credit.

"Why, Cilla, I've a horn of ale beside me, and David here has none!" said the yeoman abruptly. "Where are your manners, lass?"

"Nay, now, take no trouble," protested David. "I've a pipe betwixt my teeth, Farmer, and what more should a man want?"

"Trouble is as it's taken, David. If ye go forth from Good Intent without something good and mellow in your inwards—why, bless me, there's no cheer left in Garth."

Priscilla was glad of the excuse to put her sewing down and busy herself with David's comfort.

"I'll leave you to your talk, father," she said, after making sure that the farm's hospitality—cherished for three centuries or more—was no way shamed to-night.

"Ay, but come back to lay a trifle of cheese, and cake, and oat-bread on the table. I've supped once already, and so has David, likely; but work comes strong to victuals, Cilla."

CHAPTER IX

A LETTER FROM THE FAR LANDS

PRISCILLA gave some fleeting answer, and was gone. Up the stone stairway she went, and into the chamber where the apple-tree, grown sturdy up the wall, was putting out green springtime leaves. A slim, white sickle-moon lay helpless on her back, lighting Garth's fragrant valley. Through the casement the April wind was fretting, as it blew the muslin blind aside. It was a night when fairies played about the land, when human ears, not deaf to all romance, heard music fluting through the dull world's uproar.

Cilla leaned her two arms on the window-seat, and looked out upon the vagueness of the landscape lit by the young moon. She was thinking of her surrender to Reuben Gaunt, and wondering if she were happy in her choice; and always, as she asked the question—pretending to herself that she asked it not at all—David's shadow stole in between herself and happiness.

Gaunt himself, about the same hour, was standing on the threshold of his own house of Marshlands. He had turned the loose silver in his pocket on seeing the new moon, as superstition bade him, and had prayed for luck. He had tried, moreover, to think constantly of Cilla, but had thought instead of Peggy Mathewson, and of the lad she hoped to meet by the winding path of Willow Beck. Peggy, when she had planted that retreating arrow in Reuben Gaunt, had judged wisely.

"Must break it to her quietly," murmured Gaunt.
"Must tell Peggy that new times have come in, and old

ones gone—but who can the lad be she means to take to nowadays ? ”

“ Reuben is true at heart,” thought Cilla, as she watched Garth Valley, grey under the sickle moon. “ They wrong him, these Garth folk ; he only wants love and a helping hand, and I have promised to give both.”

David, below stairs, was talking with John Hirst, while both sent up clouds of smoke toward the rafter-beams. They had settled the matter of the axles, and Hirst was chuckling.

“ Wish ye’d come up to-morrow’s evening, David. Yond turkeys of mine are not penned up yet, and it has grown to be a jest in Garth. What with being throng with the lambs, and cutting a new ditch in Marshy Bottom, and all the spring work coming faster than I can deal with, I’ve no time to think o’ turkeys. The stakes ye made for me are lying just where ye left ’em, and they say in Garth—ay, pretty well every time I go down street—that the pen will be nice and ready for next year’s breeding-season.”

“ ’Tis time they were penned, I own.”

“ Time ? I should think it was. Look ye, David, be up at five o’ the afternoon or so. There’ll be myself and my two men, and with you to help we should get the durned thing up in no time.”

“ Right ! Yond red-wattled dandy ’ull be fair uproarious, I reckon, when his wings are clipped. Wakes the whole township before it wants to stir.”

They were silent, puffing quietly at their pipes, till David remembered the letter lying in his pocket and began to fumble for it among the odds and ends—nails and screws, a clasp-knife and a two-foot rule—which bulged his pocket out.

“ I want your knowledgeable sort of head to help me, John,” he said, handing the letter across Fanny’s curly hide. “ Will the Driver brought the mails this morning, but I little fancied he carried aught for me, till the postman dropped a letter for me at the smithy. Write few letters

myself, and get few; life's over-short for such thankless waste o' time."

Hirst read the letter through. "Come all the way from Canada, 'twould seem," he muttered. "And I should know the writer's name, though I'm puzzled to guess where and when I last saw Jane West."

"Forgotten my mother's sister, have ye, who wedded Joshua West of High Lands? So had I, or nearly, seeing 'tis twenty year since they left Garth."

"Why, I must be getting past my memory, David! A bonnie lass she was, and spirited. I remember looking her way as a lad, till Cilla's mother put all such fool's nonsense out of my head once and for all. She was over-good for Joshua West, all the same. Bird of a feather, he, with Reuben Gaunt—settled to naught, liked spending money better than the earning of it; wanted to be pretty-boy-rover over all the country-side."

David was silent for awhile. Mention of Gaunt brought sharply to him the remembrance of what he had seen to-night, as he looked down from the higher fields on the grey of the valley's gloaming. He wanted to warn Cilla's father, as he had wished to warn the girl herself; but, for the like reason, he held his peace; for Gaunt was his rival, and David the Smith was sensitive almost to absurdity when honour was in case.

"Ay," he answered at last. "He was the same breed as Gaunt. Lost his money and his lands, ye remember, and went over-seas to see if he could frame better, like? Framed well, too, : "proved."

"They somet. do. I remember hearing he was farming to some purpose at last."

"Puzzles me, too, why that should be. Is't that Joshua West's sort o' breed cannot rightly stand against Garth weather, with its ups and downs, and its east wind in May, and its heartsome, daft contrariness? Or is it that there's fewer wayside drinks to be had in foreign parts?"

"Bit o' both, I reckon. Well, then, he's dead, by what the letter says."

"Ay. Slipped under a timber-waggon, he—Joshua was always fond o' slipping, one way or another—and they picked him up with his back cut in two. My Aunt Jane has not favoured me overmuch with letters, but she's in trouble now. Life's always playing that queer game with me, John; when folk are up and about, durned if they care a stiver—but when they're down, 'tis always I'm their best friend, and must lay my tools down and hurry off at once."

"Up or down, folk look to ye, David," said the other, with unabashed and honest praise. "Ye're a bit like Sharprise Hill—steady, and there when you're needed. So Jane West, having no sons of her own, is lonely over yonder, now her good man's gone, and she wants ye to go out and set things straight?"

"That's about it. Yet Garth village is good enough for me, and always was. 'Twould be moonshine for me to go to Canada."

"Now, I'm thinking," said Hirst, slowly. "We're talking no secrets, David, when I tell ye that ye want my Cilla, and that I want ye to have the lass, though I can ill spare her. Well, now, maids are pranksome."

"May be," assented David, his face ruddier than its wont. "No news that, John. Perhaps, in a littlish way, ye'd let me ask what bearing the matter has on Aunt Jane?"

Hirst took his pipe-stem in his hand and waved it to and fro, with a chuckle intended to be subdued. "Like ye! Always like yourself, David. Hit life on the head with a hammer, ye, and never stop to dither round about the nail-top. What has Cilla to do with this letter coming over-seas? Well, 'tis this way, David. When I was courting Cilla's mother, there were ups and downs—more downs than ups, so far as I remember. The bonniest lass in the world, David, but I couldn't get near her anyway; like a mare she was, when you try and catch her in the paddock,

and she looks at you out of the corner of her eyes, and says, 'Catch me if you can.' What, short of 'baccy, David?'

"Nay, and thank ye; but I'm listening, John, and my pipe may rest awhile."

"Well, there came a day when I couldn't bide it any longer. She was not for John Hirst, I fancied, and the devil came gripping the reins of me. 'Priscilla,' said I, going up to her father's farmstead one summer's gloaming and chancing to find her in the garden—'Priscilla,' says I, 'I'm going away from Garth.' And she looked at me. I can see the look yet, David, though the poor lass is lying under Garth kirkyard to-night. 'How far are you going, John, from Garth?' said she. 'Oh, a world and a half away,' says I, as jaurty as may be."

"Go on," said David.

"Well, I meant all I said, for I couldn't bide to live in Garth unless I got Priscilla for wife—mother and daughter of the one name, ye'll notice, David, for 'tis a name I love, and smells of double stocks. 'A world and a half away,' says I. And Cilla's mother fell to crying, same as her heart would break; and I cuddled her to me, David, and I mind to this day that a yellow-legged bumble-bee got up from the glory roses and boomed across our faces as one kissed t'other."

"I'm beginn' ng to catch your drift, John," said the smith.

"Time you did, David! Mind ye, there's no two women like each other in this world. Men-folk are plain this and that, easy to reckon up; but women are teasy-like, and I'm no way for advising ye."

"Ye think I'd better go over-seas?" said David, slowly.

"Well, best tell Cilla ye're going, anyhow, and see how the lile lass takes it."

Had David not halted to-night to look down from the hills into the grey valley, he might have welcomed Hirst's advice; but Cilla was not one to walk lightly in the fields

with any man, and it was sure that her choice had fallen, once for all, on Reuben Gaunt.

"She's not for me," said the smith, looking straight and bravely into Hirst's face.

"Tuts! Where's your pluck, David? Put a bit of the devil into that honesty of thine—all women like a touch of keen sauce to their victuals."

"There's devil enough in me nowadays, and thank ye—rather too much for my liking. Truth is, my temper's bre' king, John, and breaking badly. Like an ill-forged bit of metal it is—breaks if ye hit it gently."

"Ay, I know," put in the other, with the wise, tolerant smile of age. "Eless me, 'tis a few odd years since the first man went daft over the first woman. There's others worn your shoes before your time."

"I'll go, anyway," said David, by-and-by. "Can't bide still in Garth, as things are. Yet how I'm to live without Garth street, and the forge, and the fields running up to the moor—I cannot guess. 'Twill be a wrench when it comes, for sure."

"Well, now, 'tis not for a lifetime, supposing Cilla lets ye go—which, mind ye, I don't believe."

The door at the stairway foot was opened suddenly. Priscilla had left her watching of the moonlight and her thoughts of Reuben Gaunt to come down and spread the supper-board. Her tread was light at all times, and the two men were so intent on their talk that they heard nothing until the rattle of the door-sneek warned them.

Yeoman Hirst prided himself on taking any situation by the horns at a moment's notice. So now he laughed, setting the roof quivering again, and, "David," said he, "you're full of droll tales to-night. Pity that Cilla did not come down before to hear yond last."

Cilla knew her father's diplomacy—which was always big against the sky, like Sharprise Hill—and guessed at once that they had been talking of her. Herself-command had in it something of David's strength; perplexed as she

was by her constant wish to ask help from David, bewildered by the web that Gaunt had spun about her, she gave no sign of trouble.

"David is merry to-night, father," she answered quietly, and went into the outer kitchen to fetch the supper-things.

"Ay, by dangment, he's merry!" muttered David, ruefully.

"Mustn't let her guess that ye and me are as thick as thieves," said Hirst, subduing his voice with hardship. "Love's as good as 'lost, David, when a lass knows her father wants the lad as much as she. Must run contrary, these maids, or else there's no frolic in't. I'd have their fathers choose mates for 'em, for my part; but they have no sense at these times."

After supper—a quiet, unrestful meal to-night—David got up to say farewell.

"Thou'lt open to him, Oilla?" cried the farmer, feigning to be stiffer in the joints than the day's work warranted. "Old bones are old bones, choose how you try to prove them young."

Priscilla rose gravely, and opened the inner door; then went out into the porch, and stood looking at the crisp, clean night.

"I wouldn't have troubled you," said David, awkwardly.

"'Tis no trouble, David; and yet, in other ways, you make great trouble for me."

"Now, how's that?" he asked, surprised into putting his hand on hers and drawing her into the roadway. "David make trouble for the lile lass? 'Twas not wont to be, Priscilla, before new times came in."

"It is this way, David. You ask too much, and I cannot make a friend of you."

"Seems a pity, lass, for a better friend you never had."

"Well, then, will you be just a friend, David? One I could come to, and ask for help?"

David looked at her. The moon and the stars were tender with her face, with her slim and upright body.

Olla had always been the one maid for him, but to-night there was magic in her eyes and in her touch. He remembered, suddenly and with hardship, how he had looked from the hilly fields not long ago, and had seen her in Gaunt's arms. It was true that his temper was brittle nowadays, and he had been over-brave to-night.

"Friendship be durned!" he said. "I'll take more or less, Priscilla, and good-night to you."

He was gone, and Priscilla of the Good Intent was left in the starlit road. And first she laughed, because she could not help it, hearing David break away from his quietness so suddenly. And then she sighed, and wished him back again, and wondered if she had a heart at all, or whether it had only gone astray. Certain it was that she had never liked David as she did to-night, had never seen the real man peep out so clearly. Still wanting help from him—help against herself, or against Gaunt, she knew not which—she had called to him before she could check the words.

"David, come back!" she cried.

But he was striding down Garth street, and was blaming himself for the odd language he had used toward Priscilla.

"Quiet of tongue, am I?" he muttered. "Why break out when the lile lass comes to bid good-night to me? Nay, David, nay! Thou'rt a clumsy lad, when all's said, and deserved to lose her."

Garth lay grey and still, as David walked down its moonlit length. The gentle noises of the day were gone; no voice passed gossip up and down the road; no footfall, save David's, lifted the light April dust; the grey fronts of the houses seemed full of ripe and mellow thought, and from their gardens came a warm, faint smell of flowers and greenstuff.

Now that he was to leave it, the sense of home rushed in on David with new-found force. He had felt the more in times past, may be, because he rarely found an outlet for his affections in words or ordered thoughts; and to

he knew, keenly and with pain, how much he cared for Cilla, how much he cared for this grey street and the grey, circling hills.

"I've got to leave ye, Garth," he muttered huskily. "Ay, that's about the size of it."

As he neared the grindstone—standing by the wall-side like some pensioner who thrives upon the aftermath of work—he saw a light stealing out across the road from Widow Lister's cottage. He saw, too, a plump, small figure of a woman standing at the door. Nanny Lister, it was said in Garth, would never go to bed till the last chance of a gossip had gone down the night; and she was holding to her reputation, so it seemed.

"Ah, 'tis ye, David!" she said, after peering out to learn who this late-comer might be. "Well, ye're just in time, for I've got a grievance, I have, and you're the best-tempered man i' Garth."

"Am I?" laughed David, not sorry for this interruption to his thoughts.

"Well, they say so, though I trust no man's temper myself. Men have a trick of crazying about some lile a lass or other; and I should know their whimsies by this time, having lived with a husband and buried him."

"Lister lies snug, Widow," said David, with a touch of that lightness which Cilla had noticed in him throughout the evening. "Turfed over, he, and resting from the *clack-clack* of a tongue."

The widow felt, just as Cilla had done, that David showed comelier when he got a bright edge to his tongue. She bridled a little, to be sure; but that was only a return of youth, an instinct to stand off from and to thwart a man when most she liked him.

"Unwedded folk should never talk to wedded ones, David. Maids and bachelors, I always did say, are like children playing wi' dandelion-fluff, blowing to ask if 'tis this day, next day, sometime, never, that the right lad's coming. Well, he comes, and he isn't so bright, after all,

when ye've lived with him a year or two—but ye're sort of fond of him and his foolishness—and ye put up with him, and bake his bread for him, and hearken to his grumbles when he comes home tired o' nights and hugs the chimney-corner. That's all a side o' life ye're deaf to, David. I allus did pity you stark, unwedded folk."

David the Smith would have winced at another time; but to-night he had fought his battle, had decided once for all to give up Cilla and the grey village which she queened, and he was perilously gay.

"Give pity where 'tis asked, Widow," he answered blithely. "I have the forge, for my part, and a quiet cottage to go home to, and a power o' freedom that your wedded folk seem always to be missing. Did ye ever hear of the fox that got caught in a gin in Sharprise Wood and lost his tail, and went prating afterwards that he looked bonnier for the loss?"

"You're very full of heart to-night, David. Frank-some, I should call ye. But I'll ask ye to listen, for I'm in one of my angry fits just now."

David looked at her plump, wholesome cheeks, and laughed. "Ye carry it well, I must say, Widow."

"Ay, women—'specially lone widows—were born just to try and hold up their heads and pretend, like, naught matters any way. What I want ye to look at, David—the moon, young as she is, is better than a candle to see by—what I want ye to look at is my bit of a garden here. 'Tis no way big, David, and a plumpish cow could lie along it, and ye'd never know there was a garden there; but 'tis all I've got, and it rears a good few blooms from March-time on to winter."

"Bonniest slip o' garden in all Garth. Well, then, Widow?"

"'Tisn't well at all. Stoop down, David, and see where the auriclas were when I went to bed last night. See where the tulips were, and the daffy-down-dillies blowing all their trumpets."

"Ay, they're gone, for sure," said David, with real touch.

"Gone? Should think they were. I came out this morning—feeling as cheerful as a lone widow ever does—and thought to water my bit of a garden. Found every single bloom picked off, David, and laid along the ground."

"Now, then, I'm sorry! Pride ourselves, us Garth folk, that our gardens neighbour the road, and yet no hand comes picking flowers."

"'Twasn't a hand. 'Twas greedy bird-beaks, David. Ye're friends with John Hirst, up yonder at Good Intent? Well, ye can tell him from Widow Lister that 'tis time he penned his turkeys up."

"We've settled to do that to-morrow."

"Should have done it a fortnight since," went on the other briskly. "Fussy, ill-conditioned fowls, I call 'em. Every day they come gobble-di-gobble down street, unsettling honest folk before 'tis time to wake. Heard 'em this morn, louder than ever, right under my upstairs window, but I didn't guess they were picking off my flower-heads for a bit o' frolic. Wish I had. Would have been after them wi' the thick end of a besom."

"What's done can't be mended, Widow. There's a lot of comfort in that. Good-night to ye; and, if you're civil-like to David to-morn, he'll likely bring a fresh lot o' flowering stuff to fashion up your garden with."

The widow bade him good-night in return, and let him go some twenty yards along the street. Then, with the trick that ran in her family, she followed him and called him back.

"'Tis not only John Hirst's turkeys," she panted, coming close to David. "His daughter went roving, too, to-day. Got up on the coach for Keta's Well, and Reuben Gaunt beside her. They didn't come back to Garth by coach, I noticed, and if I had John Hirst's ear——"

"Ye'd ding him deaf with talking nonsense into it," broke in David, sharply. "Priscilla came home along

the fields with Mr. Gaunt, for I met them. And why shouldn't she, say I, if she's a mind to?"

It was not just truth that David spoke; but it was true to the hilt in this—that the good name of Cilla was to be kept sacred in Garth village at any hazard.

There were lights in the Elm Tree Inn as he passed, and a buzz of voices from within. He was glad to get beyond, into the moonlit quiet again. Of all things he wanted work to-night, and he saw ahead the blurred, thick bulk of his forge, where it breasted the pale blue of the sky.

As he neared the forge, a shadow got out from the wall-side and approached him.

"Going to work, like?" said Fool Billy, stretching himself with easy unconcern. "Knew you would, though ye're longer in coming than I looked for."

"Knew I would?" echoed David. "How's that, lad?"

"Ay. Ye said ye were going to Good Intent, and Fool Billy knew ye'd come home soon, or sooner, and work it off. Ye always do, David, after Good Intent."

They went into the forge, and got the fire alight and glowing; and David worked till the sweat ran down him, because only in the friendly feel of iron and tools could he find ease.

"Billy," he said, looking up suddenly, "I'm leaving Garth—leaving grey Garth, Billy, and going over-seas."

"Why, then, I'm coming with ye," said the other, instantly. "Me to play and ye to work—ye'd be lost without Fool Billy."

David took up his hammer again, and made the anvil ring. "Stay and see to Miss Good Intent—stay and watch over her, Billy the Fool," he said.

Billy looked steadfastly at his comrade: and, though the fireglow shone on his face, showing each smooth, unwrinkled curve, David could not read its meaning. It was a half-hour before Billy explained himself.

"Best take her with us, David the Smith," he said.

CHAPTER X

STRAYED SHEEP

REUBEN GAUNT, on the morning after his holiday at Keta's Well, woke early. A thrush was piping from the lilac-trees outside his window, and the clean smell of the morning came through the casement. He remembered the magic of that evening walk across the fields, and found resolution come easily to him.

His purpose did not fail him when he had breakfasted and ordered the black cob to be saddled. He would ride across to Good Intent, find Cilla's father, and tell his errand.

Yet, while he waited for his horse, another thought came to him. He was pacing up and down the lawn which, closely shaven, stretched to the low wall bordering the high-road. The house behind him showed big for a yeoman's, prosperous and well-built, and the garden-spaces about the lawn were trimly kept. It looked a good home for a bride to enter.

"John Hirst will be busy about the fields," he thought, "before I get to Good Intent. Well, then, I'll ride round by the moor, and take my time about it, and trust to finding him nearer the dinner-hour."

He was not sorry for the respite, as he mounted and turned the cob's head, not down the broad, white highway to Garth, but up the winding track that led him to the moor. This meeting with Cilla's father had to be, but he liked it none the better on that account, and he guessed what sort of welcome he would get.

Gaunt seldom probed into other folk's motives, or his own ; and he did not know that there was more behind this roundabout journey to Good Intent than was explained either by mistrust of his welcome, or by his liking for a ride up the open lands. Yet, even when he reached the moor, he turned again to the left, and not along the right-hand path that led to Hirst's farm.

The track now was only a narrow, lumpy lane, winding between sloping heath above, and sharply falling moor below, such as was plied in autumn by the bracken-sledges. Presently it narrowed again into a foot-trail of the sheep ; and Gaunt, following this, halted at the edge of Water Ghyll. He looked down on the steep face of the Ghyll—rocks, and heather-clumps, and tufts of green fern showing in among the rusty last year's fronds—then glanced across at Clifford's Peel, where its battered remnants witnessed to the days when the Scotch came raiding sheep and cattle from the pastured slopes of Garth. It was here that Cilla and he had wandered as boy and girl, here that they had found mystery in among the beetling rocks, the rowans, the deep, thick clumps of ling and cranberry. Water Ghyll had been a forbidden, happy land to them in those days, and they had always reached Garth again with tired feet and glowing cheeks, feeling that they had come safely through hazardous adventures.

Gaunt thought tenderly of Cilla, as he recalled those far-off scampers. Wisdom in action came harder to him always than tenderness of thought ; and so many tokens more women's tears had been shed on his account than he deserved. He had won her at long last, he told himself ; and this wild trough of the moors, with its silver music of the stream below, seemed to hold some special greeting for him.

As he looked across the Ghyll, and down into the haunted streamway, his horse began to fidget, then reared suddenly. A moment later a woman, climbing the steep face of the Ghyll, showed her head above the ling. Gaunt

had been too lost in his own thoughts to hear the rattle of loose stones, though his horse had not.

The woman's face was beaten hard by toil and weather, yet she carried it straight on her broad shoulders.

"Oh, 'tis ye, Reuben Gaunt?" she said, without surprise.

Reuben, all but unseated, got his grip of the saddle again, and laughed.

"Give you good-day. Mrs. Mathewson! Scarcely expected to see you here."

"Same to ye! Least looked for, surest found, is Mr. Gaunt of Marshlands." Her eyes—hazel and big and clear, the one youthful relic that Widow Mathewson possessed—rested quietly on Gaunt's own until he flinched. She was so sure of his frailty; so acquiescent, in a bitter, stifled way, under the trouble he had caused her aforetime, and now was causing her; so sure of her own honesty, and of his lack of it. "As usual, 'twould seem, I am busy, and ye are idling."

"'Tis a day to be idle on, if ever there was one."

"Maybe, for those born to addle no bite and sup. For my part, I've been seeking strayed sheep all across the moor, and not found them yet."

"Then you've done no more work than I since sunrise," said Gaunt.

Widow Mathewson rested both hands on her hips, drew herself yet straighter. Standing there in the sunlight, framed by the moor and the dappled sky, she seemed to Gaunt like a carven likeness of her daughter Peggy—of Peggy, grown older, harder, disillusioned altogether. The straight glance that rested on him was Peggy's, too, and the mouth curved into a disdain that despised itself; only the daughter's comely youth was lacking, and the flood of passion in her cheeks.

"Looking for sheep would seem to be my trade in life from cradle-time," she said. Her voice was grimly playful, lest the tragic note should sound too clearly and beat down

the reserve she cherished. "Ay, I've been all my life looking for sheep and not finding 'em, Reuben Gaunt. A man's love, and bairns, and profit from farming lean, intaken land—I've sought 'em all in my time, and found 'em go bo-peeping like the ewes I'm following now. Life's like that, till ye've done with it—and may be then we'll find no softer bed to lie on."

"You're cheery, Mrs. Mathewson," put in Reuben, drily—"a nice neighbour-body to fall in with, when a man's spirits are running high."

"Oh, I've done with cheeriness—done with over-much grief, too, by that token. Sometimes, when I look at ye, Reuben Gaunt, a touch of the old fire comes to me, and I long to throttle ye, stark where ye stand. Then I laugh to myself, knowing I'd fail at the job, somehow, though I brought all the will in the world to it. Peggy will have to thole her misery, as I did mine at her age; and, by that token, I'm keeping ye from riding out to see her."

Gaunt knew at last the motive of his journey. He had not confessed it to himself; but this woman, with the hard, clear eyes and clear, hard insight into life, had found the truth for him.

"I'm riding in the contrary direction, as it chances," he said.

"Ah, that proves the matter. There's other birds like ye, prettyish and small of build, that fly zig-zag to their nests."

Gaunt was nettled in earnest now. "As you want a plain tale, you shall have it," he said quietly. "I'm going to marry John Hirst's daughter."

Widow Mathewson knew no surprises nowadays; she had outlived them. "I guessed as much yester-night," she said, speaking only half the truth for once, like Reuben himself. Yet it was only the name of her daughter's rival that she had lacked. "Peggy went to bed with tears in her een, and in the middle of the night she wakened me with her sobbing in the next-door room. Queer that such as ye

can keep such as Peggy wetting blan' with her tears; but I did the same in my time for as poor a dandy-tuft of a man as ye."

"We are good friends, seemingly," said Gaunt, impatiently.

"Ay, close as bee and flower, Reuben Gaunt. Ride over to Peggy—she's throng with churning—and tell her the same lies that I harkened to when I was ripe and young. God plants the like garden for all women, I take it, with the like apples in it; and, whether the man be half a man or a tenth part, 'tis all one. Reuben Gaunt," she broke off, with the passion she had denied not long ago, "why did ye keep your saddle just now when I frightened that horse of yours? There's a sharp rock on either side of ye, and two or three in front; whichever way your horse had thrown ye, ye'd not have lighted soft—and it might have been on your head."

"I learned young to keep the saddle—but I'm sorry to disappoint you, Mrs. Mathewson," said Gaunt, recovering his air of unconcern.

"Should have been glad, I, to see ye with your head smashed in," went on the other dispassionately; "glad, too, to think 'twas I that started your horse. But it was not like to be; for ye always had the luck. Luck doesn't run in my family, and never did."

There was a silence between them, as they faced each other, the only human folk in this lonely stretch of heath. In a place more busy, with others near at hand to temper the reality of what he saw in the woman's face, of what he heard in her voice, Reuben Gaunt might have carried the matter off with more success; but he was alone with Widow Mathewson, who had lived so long on the rough edge of the wilderness that she had grown to its own likeness. And for once he saw his past life through eyes less kind than Cilla's.

"I'll be going up the moor," he said at last, fumbling with the reins.

"Ay, I would. Then turn to the right, and down to the right again—ye know your way to Peggy."

There was something in the woman's bitter jest that struck deeper than any curse. Gaunt looked over his shoulder once, as he rode up the slope, and saw her standing, at once the victim of destiny and its symbol; and the breeze felt chilly to him on the sudden, as if there were snow behind it.

"'Twas she that put the notion into my head," he thought. "Well, then, I'll ride to Ghyll, as she bids me, and I'll see Peggy for the last time. We should part friends, and last night's parting was no friendly one."

He came to the marshy flats on the moor-top where the stream was born that ran through Water Ghyll. Wide to the north and south, wide to the east and west, swept the hills and moors and fields; here a broken ridge, and there a soft descending, rolling spur of hills, showed like a rude girdle to the comely Vale of Garth. Beneath his horse's feet the grouse got up and whirred, crying, crying over the desolate land; and the sky seemed near, as if a man, by reaching up, could touch it almost.

In amongst the marshes Gaunt saw the sheep which Widow Mathewson was seeking. They were feeding on the butter-grass that grows in treacherous land, and he knew them by the *M*, red-painted on their fleeces. Good-naturedly he turned shepherd for awhile, drew round them—the cob showing frankly his distaste for the wet ground—and, by dint of whistling, as if he had a farm-dog with him, and by skill of horsemanship, he gathered the ewes into a flock before him. And so he rode down the moor again, forgetting his mistrust of Widow Mathewson in the sly pleasure of succouring her at need.

She was standing where he left her, looking up the moor. Indeed, the big heath held only one figure and one thought for her; strong and weak herself, she loved the weakness and the strength of her daughter, the one link in her life that no storm had been powerful to break. She

was past the stress of youth ; but she remembered, and in her heart she was praying—she, who never went to kirk or chapel—that Reuben Gaunt might die.

Gaunt whistled low and clear again, and sent down the sheep—a huddled, scampering flock—toward the woman. He was no fool in matters of the farm, though too indolent to use his gifts in that direction.

"Coals of fire!" he shouted, putting a hand to his mouth to carry the sound up-wind. "Here are your sheep—gather them in and drive 'em home, Widow."

"Like him," said Mrs. Mathewson, with patient wonder. "Kills the heart in a woman one minute, and the next goes out of his home-bee road to do her a good turn. Would God I knew what sort o' clay this Reub : Gaunt is made of!"

She gathered her flock together, and started to drive them home ; but Gaunt was riding straight across the moor, and riding fast, for Ghyll.

It was easy, seeing the farm to-day, with the mellow spring-light dwarfed and sundered by its blackened walls—it was easy to understand the gospel in which Widow Mathewson and her daughter had been reared. It was chary of spring, this farm ; it had received more kicks than halfpence from the weather ; it looked askance at gifts o' grace, and would not listen to the larks on this blithe morning. The four-square bulk of it seemed to be asking how soon this child's game of spring would cease, and winter growl and batter at its casements once again.

Peggy had just finished churning, when she heard the sound of horse-hoofs. She stood and listened, and there was expectation in every line of her strong figure—and in her face a wild self-pity and derision.

"So you've come?" was her greeting, as Gaunt stepped inside the dairy, after fastening the cob's bridle to the outer gate. "Knew you would, soon or late—but 'tis full soon, Reuben, seeing that only last night——"

"I want us to part friends. That's why I'm here,"

broke in the other, tapping his riding-breeches restlessly with his crop.

The girl laughed. Gaunt had never heard disaster so assured in any voice. It was as if the farmstead, and the weather it had seen, and the tumults that had scarred its walls, took human shape and utterance.

"That's how ye want us to part?" she said. "Will ye be a fool to the end, Reuben Gaunt, or are ye thinking life's a game for bairns to sport with? Ride back through the ling to lile Miss Good Intent, and tell her I've returned ye with all the will in the world. Tell her that lasses catch ye, like the plague, and lose what little looks they've got through fretting for your tom-fool ways. Tell her——"

She broke down suddenly, for the strain of the past night, of the day's labour at the churn, had told on her. She had no tears left; but her eyes were full of a soft mist, such as gloaming draws from Garth Valley in the spring. Peggy was beautiful to-day; her tragedy was that of the ages, but her pathos was her own, single and direct in its appeal.

The cool, whitewashed dairy framed her; the warm, rich smell of milk and butter was about her.

"Peggy," said Reuben Gaunt, "God knows 'tis hard to part from ye."

"Ay, and God knows that Peggy Mathewson knows your lies—knows them within and without—as she knows her own face—her face, Reuben, that was bonnie enough to catch ye, but not bonnie enough to hold ye afterwards. See ye, lad, ye're bent on killing me one way or another. Why not take some handy stave and do it now? Better soon than late, Reuben, if a body's got to die."

"I'm marrying Priscilla of the Good Intent," said Gaunt, doggedly.

"Oh, I know so much since yestere'en. D'ye think to give her happiness, Reuben? I could never tell, myself, what was in your mind, or out of it, at any moment."

"Let's go up the fields, Peggy," he said, after a restless silence.

"Can as well talk here, and thank ye. As I was saying, ye puzzle me. A bit like thunder-weather, ye—the wind blows one way and the clouds drive forrard t'other way. Reuben, *do* ye think to make a happy wife of Miss Good Intent?"

It was characteristic of this upland lass that she bore no malice toward Cilla. Her quarrel was with Reuben here, with her own weakness, with life itself; Priscilla was a harmless and unmeaning bit of flesh to her, counting for little either way, save that she chanced to be the one to come between herself and Gaunt.

"I'm going to make her happy—yes. May a man never begin the good life, Peggy?"

"Ay," answered the other quickly. "A *man* may always—but I cannot see ye doing it, Reuben, somehow?"

"I had so much to tell you," he said, after another silence. "I wanted——"

"Oh, I dare say, Reuben. Wanted to 'patch up the road ye've fouled behind ye, before taking to the smooth road ready-made in front? Eh, but you must be a fool to the marrow, after all! Dress all in your good clothes, if it pleases ye, and put on a Sabbath face for other folk—but, for mercy's sake, don't come to Peggy Mathewson after that fashion. Going to lead the good life, are ye? Well, what of me?"

There was no soft wind blowing here at Ghyll Farm, as it had blown last night all down Garth Valley. For the second time this morning Gaunt saw the simple, candid picture of himself.

"You were crying last night, Peggy. I looked for a softer welcome," he said, blurting out his thoughts as a child might have done.

"Oh, and was I? Who told ye that?"

"I fell in with Mrs. Mathewson as I rode up here. Besides, I can see it in your eyes."

"Has she found the sheep?" said Peggy, with desperate pretence to ward off the graver issue.

"I found them for her. Say, Peggy, what were you crying for?"

Peggy thought of the heart-break that had been her mate last night. "Crying for a lad ye'll never know, Reuben," she answered.

He was quiet for awhile. Then suddenly his eyes caught fire at hers. "Oh, come away to the fields," he said. "We could aye talk better out o' doors, Peggy."

An hour later Mrs. Mathewson returned, driving her sheep, and found Gaunt's horse tethered to the gateway. The house was empty.

"I'll thole a lot," she muttered, "but I'm no way going to let Reuben Gaunt stable his horse in my paddock while he goes knocking nails in Peggy's coffin."

She unfastened the cob, freed him of bit and reins, opened the gate, and sent him up into the moor. The horse, glad of his freedom, turned his head once or twice in search of Reuben, then galloped off. And Widow Mathewson, who seldom smiled, laughed grimly as she saw him breast the moor-top, then disappear.

"Gaunt has galloped as free in his time," she thought. "Let him find his horse if he can, and catch it."

CHAPTER XI

A LAST YEAR'S NEST

PRISCILLA OF THE GOOD INTENT had been restless when she bade good-night to David the Smith and provoked from him a discourteous farewell. She was more restless still when the birds roused her soon after dawn of the next day and would not let her sleep again. So she got up, and lingered often at the open window, listening to the bird-calls and all the fret of newly-wakened life about the fields, while she washed, and dressed herself, and went through the simple rites that accompanied the beginning of the day in Garth.

She wondered if Reuben would like the blue print gown better than the lilac one. Her head a little on one side, a shy, quick splash of colour in her cheeks, she looked from one dress to the other, and could not make her choice. Cilla of the Good Intent was a changed lassie since that glamourous walk across the fields with Reuben; wearing-gear had troubled her little until yesterday, and she had chosen her gowns by instinct, without conscious thought about the matter.

"I was wearing the lilac one when he liked me first," she said, with a low, happy laugh. "Perhaps, when he comes to-day, he shall see me wearing it."

Beyond the open window, where the fields sloped in green hollows to the edge of Garth, the birds could not be quiet. Onsel-cocks were calling to their mates. Thrustles were whistling, piping, singing, the full flood of their melody let loose; and, like practised singers, they could

afford to play strange antics with their voices. Up and down the scale the speckled songsters ran; and now they whistled "come out;" and again they called, with pretence of great sobriety, "There's love a-waiting, love a-waiting; find him by the stile!" On the roof-tops starlings cheeped, until they could bear the thrushes' rivalry no longer, and began to mimic them in cracked and foolish notes.

First love was bewildering Cilla. She was in tune with the birds and the leafing land, and she had to put a hand on the bosom of her lilac gown, because the gladness of the day went almost beyond bearing.

For once, she was earlier abroad than her father, who had allowed himself another half-hour of bed after yesterday's hardship in the fields. Before it was time to set his breakfast on the board and pour out his tea for him, she had done a score of little things about the house, and in the dairy, and in the croft above the house where the fowls were up betimes.

"Am going up the fields, father," she said, as she cleared the table after breakfast. Betty, the farm-maid, was "throng with washing," and could give no help.

"Right, lile lass! Maids must saunter time and time i' spring. Wholesome, too, I say—and I warrant you've your day's work trimly in your hands already."

"I was down an hour before you, father," she put in, playfully.

"Ay, old bones are lazy bones. Shame on me, Cilla, lass, to break my fast at half after seven in the morning. Ye'll not tell David?" he added, with the boisterous slyness that his daughter understood so well.

"I am not likely to," she said demurely, and went upstairs to doff her apron, and get ready for the fields.

Here, again, the earlier troubles beset her. What headgear should she choose? To be sure, she did not expect to meet Reuben in the fields; but he might ride in for a talk with her father—might be in the croft among

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the hens and turkeys, or in the paddock, or in the house-place, when she returned. She wanted Reuben to approve her when they met.

She made her choice at last, and yeoman Hirst, just going out to see that his men were at their work, turned for a look at her as she came down the stair.

"Bless me, ye grow bonnier, Cilla!" he cried, with a muffled roar of affection. "Tuts! 'Twill be a blithe lad that tempts ye to share house with him."

Cilla answered nothing, but went out by the door that opened on the garden. Up the young, green pastures she went, carrying first love with her. All things to-day were big with self-importance; and she, who had thought but little of herself till now, wondered if she would be always fair in Reuben's eyes. She trusted so; for Gaunt seemed worth the best that she could bring him.

One deep regret she had, to temper the new gladness. She was holding a secret from her father, and the knowledge, just as it had done last night, brought a sense of shame to her from time to time. In the background, too, was another shadow—that of David the Smith, with his abiding care for her. But the day was not one for shadows except such as the sun and the breeze between them chased across the pastures. The world would not let Priscilla be out of mood with it; the reek of the drying grass, on which late dewdrops lingered still, the clamour of the birds, the restless pushing up toward the light of winter's hidden shoots—all were in conspiracy against repinings or backward glances.

By the mossy lane past Brow-Top Ings she went, and wild-strawberry blooms, white and starry, peeped out at her from sheltered nooks. Sometimes loitering, sometimes moving quick'ly, as if her thoughts outpaced her, she found the highest fields at last and saw the dark face of the moor above her. Not caring where she went, and obeying any whim, she climbed a fence or two and was free of the open heath. Here, too, spring's advance was plainly

marked, though it needed a keener eye to trace it here than in the lower lands.

Priscilla had no thought of foreign countries now. Garth, whose face she knew—Garth, the familiar and well-tried—was full of mysteries, delights, surprises. Could she have thought, she wondered, that Reuben Gaunt painted fairer lands for her than this in which she lived?

She lifted her head on the sudden, hearing a pad of hoofs across the peaty ground. Gaunt's horse, weary of his freedom already, and finding himself lost on the edge of an alien moor, was searching for his master. Cilla was the first human being he had seen since Widow Mathewson loosed his bridle and sent him wide across the heath; so now he came, with mincing steps across the broken ground, and laid his muzzle in her hand, and asked for guidance.

Cilla knew the horse; it was the best in Garth, indeed, and known to folk less interested than she in Reuben. Out from blue sky and the sunshine fear came suddenly to Priscilla of the Good Intent. Apart from love of his master, there is always something of portent and foreboding when a riderless horse comes fawning at one's hand.

"Where is the master?" asked Priscilla, stroking his muzzle with a hand that trembled.

The cob tossed his head. That was the question he had brought to Cilla, trusting that in her wisdom she would give him a plain answer. She had none, it seemed; and presently, growing restless again, he shook his head free and cantered off.

Cilla watched him take wide circuits, slacken to a trot, then to a walk. He was snuffing the ground like a hound on trail, and last of all he seemed to find a clue, for he turned down the moor along a narrow track, found the gate open at the bottom and trotted out of sight. The girl turned, and wandered as aimlessly about the moor as the horse had done; she was sure that Reuben was lying somewhere in the heather, thrown and badly hurt.

What had she said to her father not long ago? That snow might follow all this April weather. And now she recalled the words, the sense of chill that had accompanied them.

Tired and out of breath, she halted to look about her. Again, like the horse, she sought for help—sought dumbly for it—when her own instincts were at fault.

"Good-day to ye, now. Te-he! Rare weather for the time o' year," came a voice at her elbow.

"Why, Billy, Billy, you startled me!"

"Wouldn't do that—nay, not for a pipeful o' baccy," said Billy the Fool. "'Tis this way, as a body's body might put it. I'd been peeping into a nest here, and a lile nest there, right up the pastures; and Fool Billy got to the moor, he did, and fancied he'd see if the peewits were a-laying on yond ancient ground o' theirs up by Butter-grass Bogs. Then I saw ye—and, durn th' odd button that's left on my coat, Miss Priscilla, if I thought twice again o' the peewits."

Billy was always the courtier with Miss Good Intent; but she was too tired, too anxious, to give him more than a wan smile.

"Help me to find Mr. Gaunt," she said. "His horse came to me just now, Billy, with no one in the saddle. He's lying somewhere on the moor, and I cannot find him. You're quick to find missing folk, they say, when they're four-footed—well, find Mr. Gaunt for me."

Cilla did not know her own voice; it was so eager, so impetuous. And she relied—and knew it, she who had been self-dependent until now—upon Billy the Fool.

The lad's face altered. Across the plump and childish flesh stray wrinkles crept, as circles widen on a pool when a stone is thrown into its waters. But Cilla, though she looked at him with a frank, steadfast glance, could not guess what was passing through his mind. So it would be with Billy until the mould lay heavy on his coffin; a love greater than Yeoman Hirst's he had for Cilla, a love

greater than David's; but his thoughts were prisoned in an unwieldy bulk of flesh, and to the end he would be Billy the Fool, Billy the Well-Beloved, just as the moor about Cilla and himself to-day would always be the moor, telling her secrets to none.

"Well, now," said Billy, patiently, "I can find Reuben Gaunt for ye."

"Is he—is he hurt?"

"Sound as ye or me. Hurt? Not the sort o' man, he, to get into hurt. Slips through and about matters that might hurt him, like a snod trout when ye're a-tickling of his underward parts in Eller Beck."

Cilla did not heed the lad's veiled dislike of Gaunt. She was too glad to know that he was safe to care for aught else.

"Tell me where to find him," she said impatiently.

"I'll take ye straight to where he is," answered Billy promptly, and set off down the slope.

He led her into the fields below, then to a little dingle, all wooded in with thorns and slim, low hazel-shrubs. Not a word would he speak, though Priscilla asked him many questions by the way.

Gaunt might be safe; but to the girl there was something uncanny in the natural's silence. The wrinkles were graven deeper now in his face, and Cilla, glancing at him now and then, was awed by the look—fixed, inscrutable—in the lad's eyes.

"Chanced on him through coming to see a blackbird's nest o' mine," he said at last, when they were nearing the dingle. "Had just pushed the twigs from together, and peered in, to find the hen-bird off her nest—and I happened, as Billy the Fool might say, to look beyond that same old tree o' thorn, and down below I saw——"

"Yes?" asked the girl, fretting under all this needless mystery.

"What I'll show ye, if so Mr. Reuben Gaunt be still there or thereabouts. Now, step pratty, Miss Priscilla, and

keep your voice as low as a sparrow-chirp ; for the mother-bird may well be sitting again, and 'tis ill disturbing mated folk."

Whether it were guile or instinct on Billy's part, none would ever know. He might have taken Cilla to twenty equal vantage-grounds from which to look into the hollow ; but he made for the thorn bush, saw the bright eyes of the bird watching him, took infinite pains to part the branches a little to the right without disturbing her, then turned to Cilla.

The girl, humouring what she fancied now must be some delusion of the lad's, crept under his outstretched arm and looked down. A strip of broken turf, starred with primroses, sloped to the bubbling stream, and at the water's edge Peggy was sitting, with Gaunt's arm about her waist.

Priscilla gave no cry. The stream, the two figures sitting by its rim, quivered and rocked, then circled round her. The primroses made thin, wavering lines of yellow across this evil, daytime vision. Then all was clear again—mercilessly clear—and Gaunt's head was near to Peggy Mathewson's, as last night it had been near to Cilla's.

Priscilla of the Good Intent stepped back. She was pale, but willowy and upright still ; cut of the generations of the Hirats that had fathered her, help came to her in the hour of need.

She walked slowly back into the field, Billy following close behind her. Whatever the natural had hoped to do by this exploit, it was plain that, to his own thinking, he had failed. He kept trying to find words, and, finding none, reached out his hands towards Priscilla, with a gesture piteous and helpless.

"Billy, I am troubled," said Cilla, halting suddenly. "No, you are not to come with me this once ! I am troubled—and, Billy, I must be alone."

Grave and sweet her voice was, sweet and grave her consideration for the lad's feelings when she had need to think only of her own.

The natural watched her cross the pastures; then his face twitched, and the lines came out on it afresh; and, after that, he threw himself on the ground and dug his fingers deep into the turf and cried like a three-year babe. Afterwards he sat up, his face vacant as of old.

"Seems as if Billy's shut up tight in prison," he muttered. "Wears what ye might call a band of iron all round his head-piece—and he thinks—and he thinks—and naught comes of it. Miss Good Intent's going to cry—and Fool Billy made her."

Down yonder in the little dingle, Gaunt and Peggy Mathewson were saying good-bye. For an hour they had sat by the stream, helpless in each other's hands, as they had always been. Gaunt had once more told her frankly—he had found so much courage—that at all hazards he meant to wed Priscilla.

"Suppose I went and told her what ye'd said to me, and what ye'd looked at me, and all the brave tale?" cried Peggy, roused from her desperate acquiescence in the gospel that what would be, would be. "Would you fare well, Reuben, with lile Miss Good Intent?"

"Well or ill, I should let you go with your tale. I'll not stand between Priscilla and the truth, if she must have it—but I'll not tell it to her myself."

"There again, you're a puzzle, just a puzzle," she said, with a quick return to her old manner. "Spoke like a man just then, ye. Other times ye'll be half a man, or none at all. I've asked ye fifty times, Reuben, but could find myself no nearer an answer yet—what was left out of ye at birth?"

"Seems power to guide myself was left out of me," he answered sharply. "Listen to me, Peggy! I've nothing much behind me to boast of—but I love Hirst's lile lass."

"Ay, so ye said," put in the other drily. "It scarce helps me, Reuben, to hear it twice. For there's my own life, as it happens, as well as yours to reckon with."

Gaunt felt like a man whose feet are caught by the bog.

The clean, dry land was near to him; but his feet were chained, and it was hard to pluck them out.

As for Peggy, she was ready to drift into any mood, and past days returned to her with sudden clearness.

"Do ye mind the day we went to Linsall Fair? 'Twas years ago, Reuben, but I mind it still. You bought a ring off a pedlar, and you set it on my finger. Lord, how it all comes back!" she broke off, looking softly at him, so that her likeness to her mother was altogether lost. "There was a young moon over the fell-top, and folk were dancing on the green; and you put the ring on my finger and my heart went all soft and shameless. Reuben, you told me——"

"Told you we were wedded; and we laughed. Ay, I remember, Peggy!"

And so they fell to talk of by-gone times. Peggy wondered at her weakness, and Gaunt could not fathom the meaning of his newly wakened liking to be with this lass, when he should have been at Good Intent.

It was then that Fool Billy guided Cilla to the thorn-bush where the mother-blackbird sat upon her nest; but neither Gaunt nor Peggy saw the stricken face that watched them for a moment between the twigs, then disappeared.

"Fine-weather days don't last, somehow," went on the girl. "We thought the world held no two folk, Reuben, save ye and me? Well, we were fools for our pains."

"They're good to look back on now and then, all the same, those days."

"Oh, where's the use in your looking back? You feel no warmer in winter-time by thinking of last summer's heat. *Good to look back on?* 'Tis easy for ye to talk, Reuben!"

Gaunt got to his feet, and helped her up. "Time we were moving, Peggy," he said curtly—for he was fearing the girl's despair and tenderness. "Yond horse of mine will be tearing the reins to bits, for I've kept him tied longer to a gate-post than he ever was before."

"So 'tis good-bye?" she said, moving beside him up the stream.

"Ay, for it must be. Bygones are bygones, Peggy."

"True—if ye let 'em be. Never fear, Reuben! I'm as proud as Miss Good Intent—more so, maybe—and I'll not trouble ye. Begin with your good life, lad, and see if ye can carry it! And for all reward I'll ask to see Miss Priscilla's face when a year's gone by and the first bairn has come."

Reuben winced. None in Garth would have given him credit for it; but, weak of purpose as he was, his love for Cilla touched clean, wholesome thoughts that had been stifled long ago. He resented Peggy's easy speech touching his marriage and what might, or might not, follow. The girl knew what was passing in his mind, and laughed—not carelessly, but with the sadness that was rooted deep in all her moods.

"Sorry to hurt ye, Reuben," she said. "You're a delicate sort o' plant, and need a wall 'twixt ye and the wind."

They were silent until Ghyll Farm was well in sight. Peggy halted in the dip of the fields where the ragged thorn-trees grew. She looked long and hard at Gaunt, and again there was a strange beauty in her face.

"I was going to ask ye for a last kiss, but I'm past that, Reuben. Lad, I wonder will ye ever know the kisses you might have had! I think ye'll waken sometimes in the night, and hunger for what's past your getting any longer. Fratch as we may, we were made one for t' other, if your eyes were open wide enough to see it."

"Peggy, lass," he began, moving nearer to her.

"Nay, Reuben! It's over and done with, like a last year's nest. Yond's your way; I'm going wide into the moor, to cool a touch of some daft fever that's come over me."

Irresolute, and glancing backward often, Reuben went up toward Ghyll Farm. Life, that had seemed so plain

last night on the Garth high-road, was tangled now. The fierce, quiet passion of the girl—her certainty of heart-break, with little complaining—a shrewd guess that she was right in saying he would wake at night and think of her—these were out of keeping with the primrose lanes of yesterday.

"It's hard to go straight," said Gaunt, at last, with a shrug of his shoulders, as he reached the paddock of Ghyll Farm.

No horse was tethered to the gate; but over the top bar leaned Widow Mathewson, her brown arms naked to the sunlight and a look of grim derision on her face.

"Seeking a horse, Mr. Gaunt?" she asked, with studied courtesy.

"Yes, I tethered him to the gate here."

"Oh, 'twill be the one I loosened an hour or so ago. Found him here, when I came from driving my sheep across the moor; and I hadn't a use for him myself."

"Thank you," said Reuben, falling in with the widow's humour. "Sensible thing, Mrs. Mathewson, to loose a cob whenever ye find him tied to a gate-post."

"So I thought myself—and, by that token, I slipped the bridle off and laid it under the wall here. Will ye take it with ye, Mr. Gaunt, or shall Peggy bring it over to Marshlands? We're simple, and ye're reckoning to be one o' the gentry-born nowadays; so I fancy you'd be 'shamed, like, to go carrying a horse's bridle in your hands."

Gaunt took the bridle, keeping his temper as best he could. Quiet or stormy, Widow Mathewson always cut like hail against his face.

"Perhaps you'll tell me where the cob went, the last you saw of him?"

"Up the moor, and seemed to relish his liberty. He may be at Linsall by this time—though I doubt the marshes on that side o' the heather would stop him—or happen he's taken t' other road, and got to Keta's Well—or——"

"Then where the devil am I to look for him?" snapped Reuben.

"God knows—which, as I've seen life, means always that human folk can't guess. Where are Peggy's wits, Mr. Gaunt? God knows again—for bless me if her mother does."

Reuben went off, the bridle dangling from his arm; and Widow Mathewson turned across the paddock.

"Reckon he'll have a longish walk before him, any way," she said. "Beggars don't ride most times—and neither does Reuben Gaunt to-day."

Reuben himself abandoned all thought of seeking the cob. It would reach home, or he would hear of its whereabouts to-morrow; and he was glad of this further respite from his talk with Hirst.

"It would be too late, by the time I walked to Good Intent," he thought. "I'll ride up after supper, and catch John Hirst in his ripe, evening humour."

When he reached home, the cob was waiting for him. It had jumped the round, grey wall that guarded the high-road, and now, after a morning's tribulation, was seeking for grass-stalks on the shaven lawn.

Horses and dogs were no harsh judges of Reuben Gaunt; and now, as the cob came whinnying to him, he said to himself with a laugh that it was the first friendly welcome he had had since riding up to Ghyll.

Priscilla, meanwhile, had gone across the fields, carrying first disillusionment now in place of first love—the love that she had buried yonder in the wooded dingle. She felt no anger toward Reuben; it was as if she had seen him die suddenly and without warning, had seen him pass into a dim land of which she had no ken; and the stupor of her grief for him was on her.

For herself, the silver thread was loosened that had bound her to the spring. Sunlight and shadow on the pastures, the rising skynote of the lark, the fretting of the curlews and the plover; she saw and heard them, but could

no longer understand their beauty. Between herself and life there was a dead, grey wall; and cowslips nodded vainly to her as she passed, and when the lambs came frisking toward her, she did not heed them.

She was glad, on reaching Good Intent, to find that her father had finished his early dinner and was out in the fields. Mechanically she set about her duties, forgetting to take food herself; and, like David, she found a certain ease, a certain deadening of pain, in moving forward with her work. When Hirst came in about half after four, she was pale, and her eyes were listless, but she was mistress of herself and ready with a greeting.

"Thou'st over-tired thyself, lile lass," said the farmer, patting her shoulder as he crossed to the big hearth-chair. "Eh, well! Maids will roam i' the spring, and forget their virtuels; and maybe, after all, it does them no great harm."

A gleam of comfort came to Cilla. She had no secret now from this big-voiced, big-hearted father, who looked for each passing change across her face as a lover might have done. Sad she might be, but she could look at Yeoman Hirst again and feel no shame.

"The spring tires one, father," she answered quietly.

"Should think it did!" cried the other, settling himself with a pleasant uproar into his chair. "Blanketed in snow one week, and blanketed the next in sunshine. Ne'er heed, lassie; I'm no way for quarrelling myself with all this warmth that's bringing up the clover fair like a fairy's trick. Cilla, there's David coming at five of the clock to help wi' yond durned turkey-pen. I'm dry, lass, and I won't deny a measure of ale would hearten up my innards. Let it be the light ale, though; light ale, light hearts, they say in Garth—and, bless me, ye need a lightish heart and a clearish head when it comes to netting off a pen."

David, punctual to five—by his favourite clock, the sun—was waiting in the croft when Hirst came out.

"Evening, David!"

"'Evening, farmer! And as likely a one as we'll see this side o' Michaelmas."

"Ay—oh, ay. Wind a thought shrewder than it was, but nought to matter."

David pointed to the upper corner of the croft. "Thought ye told me all my stakes were lying where I laid 'em? Why, they're tight in their places, farmer, and the skirting-boards all nailed trim and level."

The other scratched his shaven chin and laughed. "Between you and me, David," he said, lowering his voice to a confidential bellow, "I didn't just speak truth. I can drive a stake as true as any man, and can nail the boards on trim enough; but when it comes to netting, my men and me are done, and 'twas that we wanted ye for to-day. It all comes o' listening to new-fangled notions."

"Well, now, as for that, I know naught o' netting myself," said David, glancing at the plump, white rolls of wire. "Always fenced a run with boarding, I. Who brought the notion into Garth?"

"Reuben Gaunt, I fancy; though, if I'd known at first that the notion came from that quarter, there's never a yard o' netting would have come into my lile croft. Well, we've got the job on hand, David, and here my two men are, and we'd best get agate with it, liking it or no."

The farm-hands nodded cheerily to David. "Run goings on i' Garth," said one. "Would as soon handle a bunch of thorn-prickles as yond lump o' wire. But Mister Hirst knows best—oh, ay, he's for knowing what is best."

"And if he doesn't, ye've got to think so," put in the farmer drily. "Here, lads, buckle to."

The men handled the wire gingerly at first, then with the carelessness begotten of a great despair. The uprights—seven feet high—were standing like so many fingers, pointing to the dappled sky; and, because the ground rose sharply toward the further limit of the pen, the upper poles looked down upon their neighbours in the valley.

"We'll begin on the level, like," said Hirst, setting a box of nails on the turf at his feet, and holding his hammer, so David said, "as if he were going to fell a bullock."

The beginning of the work was simple. The three unrolled the wire and got one end of it into its place, while Hirst nailed it fast against the upright. Then they stretched it to the next upright, and so went forward blithely.

"There's naught so much to be feared, after all," cried John Hirst, his voice rounding a sentry-rook that was watching them from the elm-tree in the corner.

"Naught, save sore hands," assented David. "Though I'll own, farmer, I never met stuff so maidish, and so crinkly-like to handle, as this same netting. Now, stretch it, lads! There, 'tis all in place for ye, farmer."

They finished netting the low end of the pen, and turned the corner; but soon the level of the ground grew higher, and, though the poles about them were stationed true in height, the netting would go lower and lower, till it threatened to be merged altogether in the rising ground above. They twisted it, and pulled it out of shape, and talked to it as if it were a bairn to be coaxed into a good temper; but the upper line of the wire descended constantly, and the look of this late-built turkey-pen was a thing for the soberest man to laugh at.

John Hirst threw down his hammer at last, and kicked the box of nails against the wall, and stood off from his handiwork and looked at it.

"I'm not one to swear at any time," he said slowly, "but *dang* yond netting. Dang Reuben Gaunt, moreover, who brought new-fangled notions into Garth."

The four men retreated to the wall, and sat thereon, glowering at the turkey-pen.

"Daren't trust myself with speech, I," said David the Smith. "Should say terrible things o' yond wire-stuff, once I gave leave to my tongue."

"I tell ye what," said Hirst—his farm-men laughed to

see his temper go by the board for once—"I tell ye what, David. We'll rive the whole lot down, and build up the pen with good honest laths like your father did, and mine. And if any man speaks o' wire-netting in my hearing for a year to come—why, I'll ding him on the lugs."

"Garth's right, after all," murmured one farm-man to the other behind his hand. "Them turkeys will be penned afore, or a lile while after, the next breeding-time."

"What's that ye're saying?" roared Hirst, turning on the whispering pair.

"Nay, naught—just naught at all."

"Well, ye'd better not say it just now, all the same. David, I fair hate to be beaten by a job! Let's rive it down, and bundle it into a corner, and have done wi' it. Garth notions will be good enough for me in future, I warrant ye."

David, too, was nettled, for it was seldom he went wrong in anything concerned with handicraft. "Comes o' bringing foreign truck into Garth Valley," he growled. "Why ye and me should take to handling such outlandish stuff at our time o' life, farmer, is more than I can tell."

The gate of the cress was opened quietly, and Billy the Fool sauntered idly towards them. The natural gave no hint, in look or bearing, of the woeful trouble he had caused himself and Cilla up yonder on the brink of the wooded hollow.

"Now, good day, misters all!" was his greeting, as he slouched up, his hands thrust listlessly into the pockets of his ancient trousers. "'Tis what Billy would call a fine evening for the time o' year; and yet there's somewhat cold, and wet, and sharp, blowing up from Easterby Hill."

"Tuts!" said Yeoman Hirst. "Ye're as wise as a fox when it's scenting a hen-house, Billy; but this weather is nailed to the sky, I tell ye, and won't shift for a brace o' weeks."

"Te-he," answered Billy, amicably. "I'm just telling ye what I think myself—what I smell i' my nostrils, like—

but I was never one to guess what my betters were thinking. Now, masters, I've been wondering."

"Tell us, then," said Hirst.

It was odd that he and David—the two most good-humoured men in Garth—had lost their tempers utterly to-night, and that it needed Billy's advent to show them the droll side of life again.

"I'm wondering if there was a fill o' baccy among the four o' ye—and may be a match to kindle a light with. Have been in terrible lonesome parts all day, and nigh forgotten what a pipeful tastes like."

The sun was down on Sharprise Hill now, a ball of softened fire. Billy's smoke was caught in the slanting beams, and the gnats, playing in this warmth of spring new-found after the long winter, drifted away in cloudy streams from a scent which they abhorred.

"Ye look terrible low in spirits, all of ye," said Billy, after he was sure that his pipe was drawing well. "I fancied, when I came by just now, I'd never seen four men sitting on a fence and looking so empty, like, of what they lacked."

He had not seemed to look at them until he neared the fence; yet twenty yards away he had known what their mood was.

"Did ye ever handle wire-netting, Billy?" asked Hirst.

"Nay, not that I can call to mind."

"Well, go up to yond turkey-pen, and see the way the netting runs into the hillock, choose what a body does with it; and, if ye can tell us wise folk how to set the durned thing straight, there's another fill o' baccy for ye, Billy, and a fill of ale, and another match to light your pipe with."

Billy strolled up to the pen—the rents in his breeches showed the brown flesh through—and seemed not to look at it at all. Then he came back.

"Misters, might a Fool Billy say somewhat to wise folk?" he asked.

"Say on, Billy, lad! Say on."

"Well, now, if Billy was going to climb a hill, like, after what ye might call a stretch o' level walking, he'd sit him down first, would Billy, at th' hill-foot, and think a deal about it."

"Ay, I warrant he would!" chuckled David.

"Then he'd start fair again for yond uphill climb. Do the like with your netting, misters! Cut 'un off, says Billy, where he begins to go uphill—cut 'un off as clean as a whistle, and start him fair again."

David's practical mind grasped at once that this was the right solution of the difficulty, and he laughed nearly as loud as Yeoman Hirst.

"Seems there's only one wise man in Garth! To think of us, farmer, fuming and fretting, and wasting our time; and Billy strolls up, and looks about him, and sets us straight in a minute. How d'ye do it, Billy, lad?"

"Nay, I do naught. I'd be feared to, David! A terrible thing 'twould be if I'd to work like other-some of ye."

Like a great general Billy stood by, and watched the progress of the work, when the four men set about their task again. His advice proved sound, and the netting began to climb the hill in an orderly, straight line.

As they worked—the gloaming overtaking them—the gate of the croft was opened again, impatiently this time, and Reuben Gaunt came through on horseback. Billy had seen and heard him long before the others had; but he was the only one who did not turn his head about as Gaunt approached.

"Good-day, Mr. Hirst," said Reuben, not pleased to find Fool Billy here, yet striving to cover up his uneasiness.

"Good-day, Mr. Gaunt," answered Hirst, his face grown hard as a bit of millstone grit. "I'll thank ye to close that gate behind ye."

"Why? There are no beasts in the croft."

"I'm not here to argufy. When you find a gate shut, shut it behind ye—that's what I was taught as a lad."

It had been a day of insults for Gaunt, and he longed to snap some hasty answer out and ride away; but his errand robbed him of this slight consolation, and he made the best of an awkward matter.

"Billy, just run and shut that gate," he said.

The natural turned at last, puffing gently at his pipe. "Would oblige ye, I, but 'tis one o' my playtime-days, Mr. Reuben Gaunt. I'd have bad dreams to night if I did any work."

One of Hirst's men ran to shut the gate, and Reuben looked the farmer in the eyes.

"I want a word with you."

"Say it here, then, for I'm throng with work, and this job has to be finished off to-night."

"It can't be said here. It's a matter of private business, Mr. Hirst."

"Well, I can spare ten minutes. David, see that these idle rogues get forrard wi' their work," he added, nodding toward his farm-men as he moved off.

Gaunt dismounted and slipped the bridle through his arm, and the two were half across the croft before Billy the Fool found speech.

"Is yond turkey-cock o' yours abroad yet, farmer, as a body's body might say?" he called.

"Ay," answered Hirst, without turning his head.

"Well, pen the devil up," says Fool Billy. "Pen 'un up, farmer!"

When he had watched Hirst and Reuben Gaunt go slowly through the gate at the far end of the croft and up into the pastures, the natural relapsed into his former attitude.

"Get forrard, ye three wise folk!" he said, with inscrutable gravity. "We'll have th' old devil wired and boarded in, come to-morrow's morn."

Gaunt found no easy task before him, now that he was alone with Hirst in the upper field. The yeoman, hearty and courteous to gentle and simple alike, could rarely bring himself to be civil toward Reuben. As he put it to himself,

John Hirst had a "feeling as if a rat was crawling over his chest when Gaunt of Marshlands was about." The younger man's courage was chilled, moreover, by the open insult Hirst had given him in face of the farm-men.

"Well," said the farmer, after a long silence.

Reuben Gaunt took his fence, as he had taken many another on hunting-days. "Cilla has said she'll marry me, and I rode down to tell you."

Hirst gasped, then rubbed his eyes, as if he woke from an evil dream and strove to shake it off.

"Say that again," he muttered.

"Cilla has promised to marry me, and I'm going to be a likelier man than the Reuben Gaunt you've known."

It was seldom that the yeoman could find a low voice or a harsh one; but now he did, and his big, clean-cut face had in it the look of a man when he meets an enemy in righteous battle and lusts to kill him.

"You're a liar, Gaunt of Marshlands," he said quietly.

Gaunt flushed. "Will you come down to the house, then, and ask Cilla—with me there—whether or no I'm a liar?"

"Ay, by God, I will! Seems you're a fool as well, or you'd never put it to the test. What, my Cilla mate wi' the likes o' ye? Ye've been drinking over-much at race-meetings, to fancy such outlandish nonsense."

"Come to the house with me, and ask Cilla," said the other, obstinately crushing down his spleen. "Is that fair, or isn't it, Mr. Hirst?"

"Fair? There's naught fair when you come by with your slippery ways. But I'll take ye into my house, all the same—for the last time—and I'll set ye face to face with my lass, and we'll shame ye out o' Garth, she and me between us."

The wind, that had been quietly veering all day to north of west, blew shrewdly as they went across the croft, at the far end of which Fool Billy was still overlooking the work of his three comrades. Hirst did not heed the change of

~ wind ; he was warm with faith in his little lass, and hot with anger against Gaunt.

"Come ye in," said Hirst, leading Reuben round to the front door, whereas he would have ushered David in with little ceremony through the outer kitchen. "Come ye in, Mr. Gaunt, and I shall offer ye neither bite nor sup, though that would seem a shameful thing for Good Intent."

"I'm needing none," said Reuben. "Seems a queer thing, all the same, that when I come to you with a straight tale——"

"A straight tale?" snapped Hirst. "What about my lass? Lad, ye're crazy to think I don't know your doings, five years since, all up and down the countryside. Step in, however, and we'll thrash this business out for good and all."

CHAPTER XII

AN EVENING CALL

CILLA was leaning on the window-ledge when she heard her father's footstep in the porch. The house-place was unlit and dim, save for the flickering of a fire that was dying hard in the wide grate ; but at the window there was a soft and tranquil light, half from the gleaming and half from the clouded moon. The geraniums, lined all along the sill, showed a more chastened red than in the sunlight. Outside, among the lilacs and the hawthorns and the late leafing copper-beeches, the birds were twittering restlessly, and now and then were giving a last, clear challenge to the night.

Priscilla of the Good Intent had been crying quietly. She was stunned no longer, and had gone through a fire of anguish in amongst her usual household business ; and now the tears had come. She was glad, when she heard her father's step, that it was dark indoors.

"Why, Cilla, ye're all in darkness here !" cried Hirst, seeing her outlined by the half-light that filtered through the window-space.

"I was idling, father. The day's so sorry to go down the hills, and I was sorry, too, to watch it go."

From a brave stock came Cilla, and her voice was clear and even.

"Ay, but I've brought company, lile lass. I've promised him neither bite nor sup, but that's no reason why we shouldn't have a light."

The girl raised her head quickly, and stood back a step

or two. It was hard enough to meet her father, but she was not prepared to welcome "company" of any sort. She tried, in the dusk of the room, to see who it was that came, but the guest was hidden by Hirst's bulk.

Not once did she guess that it could be Reuben Gaunt. Had Billy not led her to the thorn-bush this morning, such a visit would have been natural and looked-for; but Cilla, single-hearted and understanding little of concealment, could not realise that Gaunt might still come asking Yeoman Hirst for his daughter.

"Will you light the candles, father?" she said hurriedly. "I—I am all in my workaday frock, and I must tidy myself if you bring company."

Hirst would have had the matter settled at once; but, before he could protest, the girl had run lightly up the stair, and her footfall sounded crisply overhead. So he lit the candles, standing in their hands *—* of Sheffield ware; and he took his place in front of *—* the dying fire, and stood very straight, thrusting his hands under the lapels of his coat.

"Stand where ye like, Mr. Gaunt," he said. "I'll not ask ye to sit, for some matters are best settled standing up."

Gaunt moved restlessly about the room, and the silence—broken by the little noise of Cilla's movements overhead—did not help him to a more even frame of mind. But at least, he told himself, he had one ally here—Cilla herself. When she came down, and Hirst learned from her own lips that she had plighted troth last night, he could talk to better advantage.

Cilla did not keep them waiting long. She had no need to change her gown, but only to pour water into the basin, and bathe her face; for she knew that her father hated all signs of tears, because they loosed his steady grip on life.

They heard her at the stair-head, the two men waiting below in enmity and silence; and then they heard the

door-sneek rattle, and Cilla stood for a moment, looking across the candle-light to see who the guest might be.

She faltered for a moment, seeing Reuben's eyes fixed eagerly on hers; then she moved to the dresser and leaned against it, one hand pressed tight against the bosom of her dress, as her wont was when troubled.

"*You?*" she said faintly.

That was all; but Hirst, blind in his faith that she could never stoop to such as Gaunt, interpreted her trouble as sheer disdain.

"Best come to what we've got to say at once, Cilla," he began. "Mr. Gaunt here said just now that you were going to wed him, and I said he was a liar. Which of us was right, lile lass?"

Again Gaunt's spirits fell. He had looked for silence—yes; but for silence of the happy, maidish sort that is afraid to tell its secrets. Priscilla of the Good Intent wore no such look; grave and delicate her face was, but her eyes were full of misery.

"You were right, both of you, father," she said at last, "and both wrong. I am not going to marry Mr. Gaunt, but I promised to, yestreen."

It was hard to say which of the men was more non-plussed. This slim maid, standing with the candle-light upon her face, had robbed them both of sure yet separate faiths.

"You promised, Cilla?" said Hirst, reaching for the snuff-box on the mantel, and taking a pinch for habit's sake.

"Yes, I promised, father. But this morning I walked up by Little Beck Hollow, and I took my promise back."

Gaunt understood at last; and in his heart he cursed Peggy Mathewson, who had led him into this.

The yeoman was hard hit, and hit in his weakest spot; yet he gathered his strength up somehow, and found a weakened echo of his usual laugh.

"Second thoughts run safest, lass. You may have been

a life daft fool yestreen, but you're wise to-day. Is there aught more to be said, Mr. Gaunt?"

"I fancy not. Good-even to you," said Reuben, with desperate quiet.

"I would like to see Mr. Gaunt to the door, father. I have something to say to him," said Cilla, unexpectedly.

Hirst looked at her, and saw the strong simplicity that hedged her sorrow from prying eyes. He did not know whether he were wise or foolish—all old landmarks to-night were hidden from him—but he nodded grimly.

"You may, Cilla. 'Tis the last time he will come here," he said, forgetting to touch wood when boasting openly.

Gaunt opened the door, and waited for her to pass through into the grey moon-dusk of the porch. She went down the three steps leading to the road, and he followed. Only the soft unrest of spring disturbed the night, and the highway was their own.

"Cilla," he began, "Cilla, it was kind of you——"

"Yes, 'twas kind of me—kind to the lass I saw with you to-day in Little Beck Hollow. Yesterday was so much fancy, was it not? Nay, you need not interrupt. The drive from Keta's Well—the curlews dipping up and down the fields—the smell of violets in the wind that blew about Garth Valley—they made us fairy-kist, I think, and we fancied—what did we not fancy, Reuben?"

Priscilla was self-possessed. The old reserve, half pride, half modesty, had come to her again. She fenced herself about, and Reuben Gaunt knew that the wall was strong.

"I loved you, Cilla, and I told you so."

She strove to read his face, here by the light of the clouded moon that shone upon the highway. Women had done as much before her time, in daylight and in dusk, and had found no answer.

"Loved me? I do not understand, Reuben. Love is for one and for always, surely—'tis not a game to play at hopscotch with, as the children do in Garth Street.—"

Reuben," she went on, pain and sincerity between them getting the better of her, "I had heard stray talk of you and Peggy Mathewson, and had passed it by, because I do not care for gossip; but I saw to-day that what I'd heard was true—and Reuben—you needn't fear last night. I—I have forgotten it already."

"Forgotten it? See, that other was a tale old and done with, and——"

"Old and done with?" she echoed piteously. "If the cobwebs had not been blown away up yonder, I should have been old and done with—to-morrow, or the next day afterwards."

Since grey old Garth was in the making, it had heard such women's cries; and to-night it listened sleepily, not stirring from its quiet.

"What d'ye want of me, Cilla?" he asked, drawing nearer with a caress which she avoided.

"I want to see you wedded. It was plain to be seen this morning that you were promised to her, Reuben."

"Promised to her—what, to Peggy Mathewson?"

Priscilla would not, or could not, realise all that was implied by Gaunt's hasty words—the surprise that she should think he had meant at any time to marry Widow Mathewson's daughter—the touch of chill contempt in his voice—the acknowledgment that all was "over and done with," and that his wooing up at Ghyll Farm had been so much idle devilry.

"Yes," the girl answered simply. "What else, Reuben?"

Gaunt knew that he had lost her. Her simplicity, the return of that gentle aloofness which from the first had thwarted and enticed him, the lack of all upbraiding—these, and her trust in his good faith towards Peggy, convinced him. Perhaps, of all things in life, he cared most for Cilla's judgment of him; lose her or gain her, he must keep what little good repute was left him in her eyes. Random, full of odd weaknesses and hidden corners where

the better man in him took refuge, he was surprised to-night to find how vital Cilla's good opinion was.

Before he could answer, footsteps sounded down the road, and Priscilla turned quickly. "Good-night, Reuben," she said. "All was fairy-webs yestreen. Forget it, soon or late."

She was gone before he could find a last word to say. He watched her go, slim and willowy, the clouded moonlight on her trim, bared head; and then he turned, sick at heart, and went round to the croft to find his horse, and afterwards rode up the highway.

David the Smith and Billy passed him twenty yards or so away from Good Intent. They had wandered up the fields, after the last of the turkey-pen was finished, and had waited vainly for John Hirst's return. David greeted his enemy coldly, but Fool Billy seemed unaware that anybody shared the high-road with them.

"Surly fools, the two of them!" muttered Gaunt. "Could give any man a greeting, I, at this hour of a warm night."

Priscilla of the Good Intent had reached the porch, and stood there, half in the inner dusk and half in the moonlight. She was thinking, not of Reuben Gaunt, but of the night when she had seen David to the door, had bidden him farewell, and afterwards had called, "David—David, come back!" to unheeding ears. She was reaching out again for his hand-grip, as she always did in time of need.

David himself, as it chanced, had refrained from stepping in at Hirst's back door in a friendly way, just to tell him that his turkey-pen was finished. He had feared to meet Cilla, lest his resolution to leave Garth should once again grow weak. Yet now, as he glanced at the grey porch in passing, for old affection's sake, he saw the girl standing there.

"A fair night for the time o' year, Priscilla," he said, with would-be cheeriness.

"Ay, fair, David. But the wind blows shrewd at times, for all that."

"Tuts! We wouldn't be living, if there weren't a shrewd wind to blow all our time o' warmth away," growled David, viewing life darkly, almost tragically, for once. "We'd be dead, Priscilla, and in a bonnier world."

Billy the Fool had gone forward, with a quiet nod to Cilla and an easy slouch, as if he remembered nothing of the morning; but David halted. In sun or rain Priscilla was good to look at; to-night, with the moon-glamour on her face and the fret of new-found understanding in her voice, she was something up and above this world, to such as simple David, like the moon in the grey, still sky.

"We've finished off the turkey-pen. Will you tell your father?" said David, moving from foot to foot uneasily. He fancied, as men of their hands do, that the tale of good work finished would find approval; he was late to learn that women care little for men's work unless there be romance in it, but much for their power to charm the present moment into something softer and more silvery than the life of everyday.

"I will tell him," she answered. "David, is it true that you are leaving Garth, as father hinted?"

"Ay, 'tis true. Not yet awhile—not for a week or two, maybe. My roots are here, ye see, Priscilla, and I'm frightened-like to tear 'em out. So I'm telling myself I've a job here and a job there—making a few bits o' business that weren't there before—but I'm going from Garth, soon as I can bring my mind to it."

"Oh, I shall miss you, David!" she said unthinkingly.

David the Smith laughed sadly. "Well, that's somewhat to the good, at any rate. It would be a poor business, eh, if a man could fare out to heathen parts, and never be missed in the old home-place?"

The night, with its clouded moon, its restless wind that rose uncertainly and fell again, was like a mirror to Priscilla's humour. She was impatient of David's quiet acceptance of matters; perhaps, had he stolen now into the

porch and lost his diffidence, he would have had no further right, or leave, to go away from Garth. But David had seen what he had seen, and his faith that Cilla meant to marry Reuben Gaunt was as sure as hers had been as regarded Peggy Mathewson.

And so, because guile was far from both of them, David said good-night and went his way, while Cilla could scarcely check the impulse to cry once again, "*David, David, come back.*"

She gave a last glance at the street, wondering what her life would be in coming days; then went indoors, to meet her father and go through with all the talk and explanation which she knew awaited her.

The look of the house-place chilled her as she entered. The fire was out. No friendly horn of ale rested at her father's elbow; he was not smoking even, but was sitting with his hands on his knees, his head bent a little, his shoulders not so square as she was wont to see them. The two candles threw a cheerless light, and they were guttering now in the sudden draught that came through the open doorway.

"I'll light the lamp, father," said Cilla, with faint-hearted bustle. "Shame on me—and no one to draw your ale for you—and—daddy, won't you fill your pipe?"

"I was dreaming—just dreaming. Fill my pipe? To be sure, I'd forgotten it. Ay, light the lamp, lile lass; I miss ye, when ye're not about."

She brought his pipe and tobacco-box; then lit the lamp, and fetched a measure of ale and set it at his elbow. It took the keen edge from her dreariness to minister to her father's wants.

"See ye now, Cilla," he began, puffing fiercely at his pipe, "I want to know a few odd whys and wherefores. Ye know my view of Reuben Gaunt? Is't sober truth that ye were foolish with him yesternight?"

"Yes, father." She was sitting opposite him across

the hearth, and her troubled eyes met his without fear or secrecy. "I thought we loved each other, and I promised myself to him."

"God, ye rate yourself cheaper than I do, Oilla! There, lile lass, there! I didn't mean to be harsh. Well, then, what chanced to alter you?"

"I walked up the fields this morning," she said, with hesitation now.

"Ay, I know! What did ye find there? Not one to shift round like a windle-straw, ye."

"What I found is not for you to ask, father, or me to tell," she answered, meeting his glance again. "I can tell you this much—that the moon was over-strong for me last night, but the morning's sunlight cured me—oh, it cured me, father."

"Cured altogether, lile Oilla?" asked the farmer after a silence and a shrewd, long look at her.

"Cured altogether—yes," she answered gravely.

"That's good hearing. To tell the truth—and I'm no way hurting ye by saying it now—if Garth Valley were islanded by water, and ye and me and Gaunt were stranded on it—as folk *are* stranded time and time in those outlandish, heathen parts that David is going to, or says he is—why, me and ye, lile lass, would keep to one end and I'd ram my fist into Gaunt's face if he came spying over from t'other. Couldn't bide him, I, if there weren't another man to talk to in the land."

Priscilla scarcely heard him. Her glamour-tide was over, or seemed to be; David was unrepentant of his dullness, and would not see how she was hungering for the word, or the look, or the touch, which only he could give. She was striving already, striving bravely, to reconstruct her life. There would be the usual round of household duties, the watching after her father's little comforts, the going tired to bed at night and waking to the birds' summons in the morning; but pleasure in these things would be gone, because she would remember the strange,

measured lands through which Reuben Gaunt had led her yesterday.

"Come here to my knee, lass," said Hirst, by-and-by.

She knelt on the rug, and put her hands on his knee and rested her chin in them, looking into the fireless grate. So she had knelt in her childhood's days—and afterwards at rare intervals when she and Yeoman Hirst were moved to special tenderness.

"I won't deny my pride's had a fall, and a steepish one," he went on, thinking that his touch upon her hair was gentle.

"So has mine, father; but life must go on, pride in one's way or not."

"Art going to be a lile wise woman before thy time? Ay, pride tumbles and gets muckied, and ye've to clean it up again wi' patience, as ye clean harness-gear. Still, I'm sticking to my pride, Cilla, till they coffin me up, and so are ye; the Hirsts all do by nature."

They said nothing for awhile, but between them there was the speech of trust and understanding.

"Cilla, lass?" said the yeoman, presently.

"Yea, daddy?"

"Wish I knew more about this daft business. Wish ye could tell me, like, just what ye saw up yond pasture-lands to-day."

"I wish so, too," she answered simply; "but I cannot tell you, father."

John Hirst took a pull at his ale—the first one. "D'ye know what I've been thinking, Cilla?" he said, wiping the froth away from his lips with a kerchief patterned all in blue and white.

"Nay, I could not guess."

"That, if ye came to a tussle 'twixt ye and me, I'd fare hard. Ye're alim to look at, and I could lift ye wi' one hand and think naught on 't—but your will is made out of a piece o' hickory wood, I do believe. Like ye the better for 't, I—though ye mustn't let yourself hear me say as much."

"There's likely to be no quarrel, father—now," said she.

John Hirst sat brooding by the fire, long after Cilla had gone up to bed.

"Queer," he muttered, as the summing-up of his thoughts. "Ay, queer! A man may have naught but tricks at his back—tricks I could teach a dog, if I reared him from a pup and didn't want to make him work for his living—and yet he can maze a lass i' the springtime till she knows not where she be. There's only one man in all Garth fit to touch my lass—and he's thick-headed David, who's going to outlandish parts."

He stepped out of doors, before locking up for the night, and looked at the shrouded moon, and tasted the cold of the whimpering breeze.

"Cilla said something about snow coming, a day or two gone by," he muttered, "and Billy the Fool turned weather-prophet, too, to-night. They're apt to be right, Billy and lile Cilla, and there's a snarl and a tremor i' the wind that I should know by now."

He did not confess as much to himself, but the superstition of those cradled by the weather was with him, and in the wind's contrariness and spite he heard quiet omens of disaster to himself and those he loved.

CHAPTER XIII

AT THE DRINKING POOL

PRISCILLA was not apt to lie awake o' nights. The keen air of the fells, the round of her daily work about the farm, forbade it. Yet, after she had talked with David Blake in the moon-dusk of Garth Street, had talked with her father afterwards beside the hearth, she could not sleep. Shame of the kiss that she had given to Reuben Gaunt, as they walked through fairyland last night—bitter shame of the scene that Billy the Fool had shown her through the parted twigs—a great loneliness, an impulsive reaching out for David's steadiness—these kept her company. She seemed to stand in a wood where all the trees were thick and heavy, and the wonted tracks were lost.

When at last she fell asleep, dreams chased her. First, David was laughing at her as he said farewell, and got aboard a ship with big, white sails. Then Reuben Gaunt was sinking in a moorland bog, and lifted his two hands in appeal to her, and she ran across a stubborn waste of heath to reach him. She was glad when at last the dawn stepped boldly into her room and roused her. Her first thought was of the farm, her second of the silence that lay about the house. The light which came through the casement seemed brighter, colder than a usual April dawn. There was no early challenge of the throistles, no sleepy call of a linnet, and such sounds of human life as came from the roadway were strangely muffled.

With a sense of trouble and foreboding Priscilla went to the window, which she had left open to the soft night wind not many hours ago. The low sill was an inch deep in

snow. She looked out, and in the keen, strong dawn-light saw nothing but whitened branches, whitened mistal-roofs, and flakes that fell persistently. She stood there awhile, watching the storm increase, listening to the wind which, quiet till now, began to whimper round the gables overhead. It was no playful shower, such as often came in late April, waiting only for the mid-day sun to banish it; yet, knowing the signs of weather as she did, hearing that note in the rising wind whose meaning was plain enough to all country folk, Priscilla felt no surprise. It was fitting. Spring, with its make-believe of primrose banks, and birds that litanied the sunshine, was a dream she had dreamed in company with Reuben Gaunt. That had passed, and winter had set in again. She was glad that it was so. Winter was a time of stress and hardship, that left no leisure for dreams. Better the snow than the soft air of an April gloaming, when all the tribes of furred and feathered things went wooing and set the key-note for more sober human folk.

Priscilla turned to the ewer, with a quick change of mood. She blamed herself for those few moments at the window. There would be real work ready to her hand below-stairs before this storm was ended. The chill of the water heartened her, and afterwards she did not halt to choose between the blue gown and the lilac. She donned instead a rough, short-skirted gown of homespun, and went down to the house-place. Her father was standing in front of the fire which Susan, the farm-maid, had newly lit, and the yeoman's face was grave.

"Thought thou wert never coming, lass," he growled, trying to find his usual good temper. "You know there's a lamb-storm blowing up behind all this bonnie snow?"

"Yes, father—yes, I know. I'm ready."

"Ay, but is breakfast? Peggy is young, and late—and you are young and late, like Cilla—you'd do without your breakfasts, both of you, but old folk don't start the day on an empty stomach, lass."

Peggy came in at the moment with a dish of steaming bacon, set round about with eggs, and the farmer sat down to it with the impatience of a man who is thinking only of his work and of the need to feed his muscles. Cilla poured out the tea for him, brought it to his elbow, ruffled her hand across his thick, grey hair.

"The lambs are needing you, father. Let me come up with you into the fields."

"You? You've work enough, lile lass, when we bring the lamblings down into the fold."

"But not till then, father. Let me go with you. I shall be restless, else."

Hirst had finished half the dish of bacon, and three eggs to go with it. He felt ready for the day's work, and, as the way of a true man is, his temper gained in cheerfulness.

"I'm like a lover to your whim, lile Cilla. If you're set on coming—well, I've a sort o' fondness for the tread o' your heels beside me. Hark ye! The wind's rising fast, and there's a snarl at the tail on 't. 'Tis a bitterish end to spring warmth, this. Don your high boots, lass, and don 'em quickly."

Cilla went, with the pleasant, quiet obedience which smoothed many a rough road for Farmer Hirst. She was back again before he had time to grow impatient.

"Now, though I say it, Cilla, ye look workmanlike and trim," roared her father. And he laughed, as fathers will, with some surprise that he should have reared a bairn so full of comeliness.

Priscilla had not forgotten her trouble. She had laid it by until some more convenient season came for thinking of it. Workmanlike she looked, indeed—her high boots half-hidden under the rough skirt—but she carried still the look of Miss Good Intent, who yesterday had worn a lilac gown and had sought for glamour in the pasture-lands.

"Father, there's work up yonder in the snow," she answered, with a gentle laugh. "You can praise me afterwards."

"That's true," said Hirst, soberly. "Praise can always bide, like money in a safe-sure bank. Work willun't bide—it never did and it never will, lile lam."

They went up into the pastures, father and daughter, and it was hard to tell where the ewes lay with their lambs, or where the white hummocks of the snow were lifted by the wind. Hirst's farm-hinds, cursing the weather as they followed him, were puzzled to tell snow from fleece, and the dogs were full of petulance. The snow came down in wet, big flakes. The wind sobbed, and wailed, and rose now and then in sudden gusts, driving the flakes savagely across their eyes. And through the wind-gusts, and the sharp, impatient barking of the dogs, there came the wild bleating of the sheep, the pitiful and weakling cry of lambs half-starved.

One by one they found the ewes, and it was odd to see how the mothers, not valiant at usual times, grew brave and full of strange resource.

If a farm-lad gathered a couple of lambs into his arms—twins, such as Farmer Hirst had boasted of last night—the mother would grow manlike for the moment, would seek for a point of vantage and charge him down. When Priscilla, loved by all four-footed folk, gathered a lamb into her arms, to carry it down to the fold, it was the same. There was panic among these bleak-witted ewes; and, like all dreads, it brought out some hidden source of courage.

David the Smith, scenting trouble, came trudging through the snow to help his neighbour. He passed Oilla with a quiet greeting—thinking overmuch of last night's farewell to her in Garth street—and busied himself at once with rescue of the flock. Simple of mind, strong of body, he set to his task at once, shouldered a ewe that was sick with the cold, and carried her down the pastures and along Garth street, until he came to the turn of the road that led up to Good Intent. Widow Lister was at her door, as usual, walking up and down in front of her garden-strip, her feet protected from the snow by huge pattens, her eyes opened wide for any chance of gossip. She set her arms

akimbo on seeing David, and her tongue was stilled for a moment. The smith, indeed, swinging steadily forward under the burden that hung limp across his shoulders, his face glowing with the tranquillity of strength, seemed to fill the snow-set canvas of Garth village.

"Why, David," said the widow, in an awed voice, "you're marrow to yond print o' the Good Shepherd that's hanging ower my chimney-piece."

David halted. The roots of his religion lay deep, and may be for that reason he seldom spoke of it. "Oh, whisht, woman!" he said, with a shy, odd air of rebuke. "I'm a plain man o' my hands, with a day's work to do. I'll thank ye not to name me in company with my betters."

"There now!" put in the widow, plaintively. "You're the first man I've come across who fought shy o' praise. You *are* like, David, all the same—the ninety-and-nine you've left, to bring the lost odd 'un in, just as in the picture."

"Ay," answered David, as he moved forward, "but some o' the ninety-and-nine are needing me, too, soon as I've gotten this lile ewe into shelter."

The widow let him make ten paces forward; then, heedless as a child that every halt was so much added to the dead weight on his shoulders, she tripped after him, her pattens moving nimbly through the snow.

"Oh, David! I knew there was summat on my mind."

David turned with weary good nature. "Well, if 'tis as heavy as what I carry on my back, Widow, I'm sorry for ye. What is 't?"

"Nay, 'tis nobbut a bit of a window-fastener that willun't catch. 'Tis such a little job, like, I thought ye could slip in any odd moment you had to spare, and mend it for a poor, lone body. When the wind rises o' nights, David, it like as it wakes me fro' my sleep, rattling the windows so."

"You and your loneliness!" grumbled David. "Well, I may think of it by-and-by."

"Oh, and, David——"

But the smith went forward, and, after laying the ewe in warm quarters, struck up again into the snow by a track that avoided Widow Lister. Priscilla, meanwhile, had gone far up the brink-fields, in search of any roving sheep that might have been over-blown before they could reach the lower pastures. It was Cilla's way to seek after folk who had strayed.

She found no sheep; but at the top of the highest brink-field she halted for a moment to look up the face of the bleak, high moors. The snow came sparingly now, the wind was falling, and far behind Sharprise Hill a yellow light crept softly through the clouds.

At the wall-corner where Priscilla stood, three long pasture-fields met at the common drinking trough—a round, deep pool, fed by a spring which bubbled up from the limestone at the bottom. One field of the three was owned by Gaunt, and he, too, was seeking strayed ewes this morning. They met face to face, he on one side of the pool, Cilla on the other, and they were silent for awhile, embarrassed by their memories of yesterday.

"A right ending, eh, to yesterday?" said Gaunt at last, with quiet bitterness. "Such weather couldn't last."

Cilla's pride came to her aid. The wild-rose colour was in her cheeks, but she held her head high.

"You are not used to weather, as we stay-at-homes are. It is all in the year's work, Mr. Gaunt. To-morrow, or the next day after, we shall have forgotten there was snow at all—unless we lose any of the lambs."

Gaunt understood that Cilla had taken firmer ground than he, and meant to stand on it hereafter. There was to be no hint between them, such as he had implied just now, that they had shared a day whose magic both regretted. He began to wonder if her heart had been in the matter at all, and a wayward impulse came to him to piece their broken love-tale together all afresh.

While he played with the impulse, Billy the Fool came

up the field behind them. David, as he carried a couple of lambs to Good Intent, had met him in the roadway and had suggested that there was rare play-work to be done in helping Farmer Hirst with the sheep.

"There never was such a game," David had suggested sily, "as setting a daft ewe over your shoulders, or carrying a couple of lambkins i' your arms. The sport might have been made for ye, lad Billy."

So Billy had sought the pastures; and he chuckled soberly, as he trudged through the snow, to think "what a terrible queer notion David had for lighting on a bit of frolic."

It was only when he topped the last rise of the field, and saw Gaunt talking to Priscilla across the pool, that his face changed. At times the clouds and the content that sheltered Fool Billy from the realities of life were riven asunder, and it was always the one picture that he saw—a way-worn woman coming with her child to the gate of Marshlands, the harsh refusal at the door. Now, as he went up through the snow, he could recall the bitter cold of that long-ago night when his mother and he had sought shelter in the porch-way of the house. Gaunt's voice, which was his father's over again, so Garth folk said, had recalled the past to Fool Billy when earlier in the year he dropped Reuben into a bed of growing nettles. The sight of him now, his closeness to Priscilla, roused, not Billy's strength, but his will to use it blindly. Before Priscilla knew that he was near, he had passed her, had climbed the wall, had put his arms about Gaunt and carried him to the edge of the pool. Hirst himself, or big David, could not have resisted the village fool when his quietness turned to fury; and Gaunt was slight of build.

Cilla was bewildered by the suddenness of the attack; but her habit was to meet emergencies—such as Reuben's disloyalty and the change in April's weather—with the reliance that came from clean living under the clean, steady hills. She saw that Billy was swinging his burden

lightly over the pool; and in the lad's face she saw a tumult.

"Billy," she said quietly—"Billy, what are you doing?"

He turned as a dog does when his master whistles, and the evil left him—left him Fool Billy once again, with surprise in his helpless face that he should ever have done amiss. He set Gaunt gently down upon his feet, and Reuben, sick at heart, went through the snow, and round the bend of Little Beck Wood, and out of sight.

Billy climbed the wall, and stood a little behind Oilla, waiting for chastisement.

"What made you do it?" asked Oilla of the Good Intent.

"Well, now, I could no way rightly tell ye." His brown eyes were wistful. "Seems a sort o' blindness comes on a body when he sees Reuben Gaunt, and I put my head down like a bull and made for him. Terrible weak in the head Fool Billy is."

"But it was all—all so unlike you, Billy. What did you mean to do with—with the man you held in your arms?"

"Do?" he answered, with quiet surprise. "Why, drown him, Miss Oilla, as ye do wi' kittens when they're not wanted. Am fond o' kittens, I, but they do get terrible cumbersome at times."

"Oh, lad, go down to David at the forge," said Oilla, with a sudden laugh that was made up of pity and of helplessness. "Go down to David, and tell him I sent you to him for guidance. And, Billy, for my sake, promise you'll not play with life and death again."

His muddled wits caught the one right appeal. "For your sake, eh?" he asked. There was surrender and question in his brown eyes.

"For my sake—yes, of course. Always for my sake, Billy."

"Te-he!" chuckled Billy the Fool. "Will keep that

notion right in the middle of my daft head-piece, so I will. Give ye good-day, Miss Oilla."

He turned and went down the slope with great cheeriness, taking a bee-line through the snow and breasting the drifts with the strong, unhurried ease that marked Fool Billy's days. Oilla did not know it, but her plea that he should do all things for her sake had made for Billy's happiness. To please her was frolic of the sort he enjoyed at David's forge, but a rarer and more pleasant pastime.

Mrs. Mathewson rented the third of the pastures that clustered round the drinking pool, and she was leaning over her wall, a still, passionless figure. She had been a looker-on at the struggle between Gaunt and the Fool; she was always a looker-on these days, grave, hard of face, a little disdainful of the tumults that beset younger folk. If swayed either way by feeling, she was pleased that Gaunt should be belittled in Priscilla's eyes; in no case could it do him harm to meet with a fall or two. And yet, in some odd way of her own, she "had a silly weakness, like," for this will-o'-the-wisp who had caused her heart-ache in the past, and would cause her heart-ache, doubtless, many times again.

"I've lost no lambs, Miss Priscilla," said the widow, enjoying Oilla's startled, backward glance. "Hope you've had the same good luck yourselves down at Good Intent. Oh, to be sure, there's weather, and weather again, and naught but weather, up here on the heights. We've got to put up with it, like ye put up wi' a silly lass."

"You startled me," said Oilla, meeting Mrs. Mathewson's quiet glance. "Yes—oh, yes, our lambs are all ingathered, or nearly all; I came up here to seek the last two that were missing."

"And found Reuben Gaunt instead, and a big lad holding him over the pool? Well, they're neither on 'em lambs, an' neither on 'em lions; both are just what ye might call, like, a mixture 'twixt the two."

Harsh this woman might be, but to Oilla she stood just

now as something strong and honest, something that had suffered, and stood firm, and been beaten by the weather out of all comely shape.

"I care so little for gossip," she began, moved by a sudden impulse to confide in this woman who seemed grey and hard as the wall on which she leaned; "yet it meets you at every turn. Mrs. Mathewson, why should Fool Billy go past himself like this? He's so quiet at usual times—and then he loses himself in fury at sight of Mr. Gaunt. They say, of course——"

"Oh, ay," put in the widow, drily; "and they say right once i' a way. They're half-brothers. I should know, for I kept house for Gaunt's father before I was daft enough to marry Mathewson o' Ghyll."

Oilla did not wish to hear the tale, and yet she stood there, irresolute, her face half turned to Mrs. Mathewson's.

"You've heard tell o' the night when a stranger-woman came knocking at the door o' Marshlands?" The widow was still regarding Oilla with hard, keen eyes, and it seemed that she, who kept silence with her neighbours usually, had some purpose behind all this talk. "Well, I was cooking supper for Reuben Gaunt's father at the time, and I mind saying to young Reuben—who was laking in the kitchen and nigh teasing the life out o' me—he was fourteen or so then, was Reuben—I mind saying to him that it war a night ye couldn't find heart to turn a dog out in. Th' wind war blowing aleet an' hail in sheets agen the window-panes, an' it war crying down the chimneys till ye could hardly see across th' floor for peat-smoke."

Oilla was listening. She had lost all desire to escape. The widow's gaunt, tall figure, the impassive hardness of her voice as she brought the bygone scene before the girl's eyes, were part of the snow and the white stone fences, part of the falling wind that sobbed through every cranny of the walls and ruffled the water of the drinking pool that divided the two women.

"The smoke was making me sneeze and cough, but it

wasn't that made me so mad with it. It was spoiling the master's supper, and his temper was fearful when aught went wrong i' th' house. Well, I needn't have bothered my head about that, for at that minute there came a rapping at th' front door, and I ran out into the passage to see who it was. There was a woman standing there, an' th' wind blew her fair indoors, without a by-your-leave, soon as I lifted the sneek. She was nigh as bonnie and alim as ye, Miss Oilla," she went on, after a long glance at the other. "The master was a fairish judge o' women i' that way, I'll own, like the son that followed him. She had a bairn with her—may be four year old—and she wanted the master; so I called him, after shutting the door to keep the wind from blowing us all to bits."

She paused and looked across the shrouded fields, and shivered. Hard as she was, the misery of that night returned to her. Oilla stood waiting silently.

"The master came, and looked once at the stranger-woman, and a sort o' devil came into his face. Then I knew that one of his black moods was on him; for I was used to the look o' them. The woman was very pitiful to listen to, an' she said she was his wife—married by stealth a year after th' first mistress died. I believed her, for my part, and a woman can tell most times when another woman's lying. She was plain of her speech, though, and Reuben's father always had a queer pride about him—must have a ladyish wife at Marahlands, or else hide her i' the haymow out o' folk's sight. That's Reuben's way, too."

Priscilla wondered at the sudden bitterness in her voice, then remembered that this was Peggy's mother; and the widow knew, it was plain, that she was her daughter's rival. Tears of pride and humiliation started to the girl's eyes. It was easier to conquer a secret trouble than an open one.

"Well, to shorten a sad tale," went on the older woman, after seeing that her taunt had struck home, "Mr. Gaunt turned both mother and th' little lad out into the cold; and I could have throttled him for it, if he'd been a thought

less strong. The rest o' the tale ye know, Miss Oilla. They found the mother dead on the doorstone, and Billy the Fool was strong enough to weather the cold—else he wouldn't have been here at the drinking pool to-day."

Oilla gathered her strength again. "Why do you tell me this?" she asked. "I say, with father, that one day's trouble is enough as it comes, without going back to the old sorrows."

"Why?" The widow's face was fearless in its denial of all pity. "Why, like baby? Because I've watched ye and Gaunt go lover-like along the pastures before this daft snow came. Because I want to warn ye that Gaunt comes of a bad breed, and never in this world could be aught but will-o'-wispie. Oh, my lass, I've seen a few love-makings—and I've seen the end o' such like nonsense, and I know."

Oilla laughed, and Widow Mathewson, whose outlook on the world was impersonal and cold—save when human weakness broke down the barriers—approved this slim lass in her workaday dress of homespun.

"It was only yesterday that I bade Mr. Gaunt marry where his heart lay," said the girl, quietly. "If I had cared for him—after that fashion—should I have been glad when he told me he was marrying Peggy?"

"You were glad?" asked the widow, with suspicion.

"Why not? He is fond of Peggy, and I think that—that he will settle down, as a farmer should——"

"Ay, so I think, too," broke in the widow, with sudden feeling. "I made the worst o' that bygone tale, I own, and never told ye that Reuben, on that night when he'd been plaguing me in the kitchen, crept round into the passage, listening to the stranger-woman's tale and seeing her driven out into the wind. Well, he waited for his father to go, and then he crept to my side, did th' lad, and we listened to her as she lay there, crying, just outside th' door. Then he pulled the door open, and we were helping her in when old Gaunt came, all thunder and lightning, down th'

passage. He looked Reuben and me i' the big upstairs room. 'Twas so we passed the night, Miss Oilla, and I've a soft spot i' my heart for the lad ever since, spite of his cantrips."

They looked across the pool at each other, with the snow and the moaning wind between them.

"What chance had he?" said Oilla. "With such a father—oh, he did well that night! He did well."

Widow Mathewson turned. "Seems I misjudged ye. I never can trust a bonnie life face like yours these days. Oh, ay, he may do well enough for Peggy. Any way, she's set her heart on him."

When Oilla got down to the croft and reached the lathe, she found David the Smith sitting on an upturned box. He had a lamb on his knees, and he was feeding it with milk from a bottle. Fool Billy was standing near, and his mouth was wide as a rift in the clouds when the sun broke through.

"I've been laughing, Miss Good Intent," said Billy. "Near crushed my sides, I have. Here's strong David feeding a lamby with his own. Te-he! Ye'd never think he was making at the forge."

David was shy. This business of saving lambs from the snow had seemed natural and easy till Oilla came. Now he felt clumsy.

"Billy is right," he said, as he handed the lamb and the bottle to Oilla. "'Tis woman's work, this. I was only waiting till ye came."

Late that night, when her work was done and the moon was up above the fells, Oilla unbarred the porch-door and went out into the raised path that protected the strip of garden from the highway. The wind had long since shifted to the south, and quiet Garth looked all like fairy-land. From the green, young twigs of the beeches, across the road, the snow fell away, showing leaves half-opened. There was everywhere the sound of gentle splashing—wet snow falling on wet snow—and the fells beyond were clear

of mist. The air was warm and scented; for it was Garth's way to follow storm with blandishment.

Oilla was full of her trouble still. It had been easy to give up her man in the heat of pride and sacrifice; but she was lonely now. She remembered, as lasses will when they have good fatherr, how often Yeoman Hirst had cheered her in bad weather with a hearty, "Oh, 'twill lift, lass, by-and-by. Be sure 'twill lift. 'Tis only nature for the sun to pop out fro' behind a cloud and take a body by surprise, like."

"Why, yes," she said, with a long glance at the hills. "Father is right. It always lifts; but the waiting-time is hard—just time and time."

CHAPTER XIV

SUMMER

WHEN the sun began to warm the land again, and the sheep were crying up and down the pastures, their lambs beside them, full summer came with a swiftness rarely known in these grey highlands. The lilacs bloomed two weeks before their time. The birds let loose their litanies, as if the like blue sky and thrust of the green-stuff forward had not been known till now. Folk moved abroad with keen sunlight in their eyes, and in their voices a cheery welcome for their fellows. Even Widow Lister forgot to fidget, forgot her love of gossip with a spice in it, and turned instead to tranquil tending of the garden-strip that fronted her cottage. From the hedgerows and the fields, from the moors that raked up into the blue arch of the sky, there rose a quiet, insistent song of peace.

Cilla of the Good Intent met Gaunt by chance these days on the highway, or in half-forgotten bridle-paths that were young when Garth was in the building; and they passed a greeting one to the other, and went their ways. She was puzzled—and so was he, had she guessed the truth—to note the change in him. He was less assured than of old; there was shame and appeal in his eyes when he met her; he seemed to Priscilla like some big, helpless dog that had lost its way and went seeking for its home.

Cilla was true daughter to Yeoman Hirst. She might suffer, but malice passed her by. She wished no ill to Gaunt, though he had spoiled her first dream o' love. She wondered, simply and without over-much repining, that

her life had grown so empty, that she no longer cared for the flower-scents and the wood-reek that guarded the village like a benediction.

The year wore on to July, and there had been no rain since a light April shower that had followed the snowstorm. The pastures, striding stony hills, grew parched and brown. With August, and still no more than a day's rain now and then, even the brown of the grass was burnt, and the hot breeze carried its dust away. Far up the crests of the hills there was no green to soften the white glare of the limestone. All was harsh and bare, and lacking any gift of charity. The sun, at usual times a none too frequent guest, had overstepped his welcome now, and the air grew hotter and more languid.

A rumour came to Garth these days, and the farmers, as they rode down the street to market, grew less cheery in their greetings. They knew, each one of them, the danger that lay near to their wives and bairns; and, knowing it, they kept silence.

Their wives heard the rumour by-and-by, and there was clatter of tongues along the dust of Garth's street. Widow Lister, by gift of nature, talked more shrilly than her sisters, just as she had been the first to bring the news which no folk cared to hear.

"I told you so," she whispered, running out to meet Hirst one day as he passed down the street. "The black fever has come nigh to Garth, and ye wouldn't take no heed. I'm a lone widow myself, with none to care for——"

"Oh, ay, but you have!" Hirst's voice was cheery still, though it was less boisterous than usual, and behind it there was a hint of sharp reproof. "You've got yourself to care for, Widow. That means a lot to ye."

"Now, what do you mean?"

"I mean this, that folk who have only themselves to think of forget to think for others. See you here, Widow, the fever's not reached Garth yet. 'Twill reach it sooner, I

warrant, if ye go scaring timid women—as you're scaring 'em each minute o' the day."

"Eh, now, I'm to be scolded, am I?" The widow brushed a few tears away, and looked up into Hirst's face with the timidity which had always served her well. "To be sure I've no man to speak up for me. I must bear my crosses meekly, for nobody heeds a body much once she's lone and widowed."

Hirst's face, with all its jollity and kindness, was lined deep by hardship, by fight in life's open with such plain foes as weather, peevish soil, and foot-rot that attacked his sheep. The widow's was rosy, plump, unmarked save by such little wrinkles as a baby carries: she had sat by the hearth all her days, sheltered by four walls; and death, when it had forced her from the fireside warmth to the churchyard and her husband's grave, had been no more than a worry which spoilt her comfort for awhile. Yet the round, shining face, looking up into his, made Yeoman Hirst uneasy this morning; it put him in the wrong; it made him feel as if he had rebuked a kitten for playing with a ball of wool.

"Well, we're made as we're made, Widow!" he cried, preparing to move on. "I only ask you to listen when I tell ye what a power o' harm ye can do by scaring folk when the fever's close at our doors."

"Yet ye're going to Shepston Market, same as if Shepston hadn't got fever in every other house."

"True," said Hirst, his jaw set firm. "There's need for it, fever or no, if I'm to do right by the farm; but there's none for stay-at-homes to chatter and wake a sleeping dog."

Widow Lister watched him go through the white, breathless sunlight, and for once she did not call him back.

"They're strange, is men," she thought. "My own man was like Hirst—would run into any danger if he'd a whim for it—yet he'd grow outrageous as a turkey-cock if I set my tongue round a lile, soft bit o' gossip. Men, they

never seem to understand life, poor bodies ! Ah, there's David the Smith coming up street. He's a soft heart, he ; I'll just get him to see what ails yond canary-bird o' mine while he's passing."

David, however, was impatient. He listened to the story of the bird's ailments, but his air was brisk and downright, just as Hirst's had been. A man is apt to carry that air when he knows that danger lies close to his friends' doors.

"Starve him a bit, Widow. Cosset him less by the hearth, and he'll come round, same as other men-birds. I've a bigger job than canaries to see to."

Again the widow did not pursue him as he strode fiercely up toward Good Intent.

"The fever's come to Garth a'ready, I'm thinking," she murmured dolefully. "If David's lost half o' the few wits he had, we've come to a fine pass."

David halted as he came to the gate of Good Intent. His face was full of suffering, and for that reason it showed a greater dignity. He unfastened the latch with sudden decision, as if ashamed of his cowardice, and stepped into the cool, grey porch, and stood at the door of the house-place.

Cilla was standing at the table in the full light of the sun that streamed through the narrow windows, and she was ironing a lilac frock. She had not heard his step.

"Cilla !" he said in a low voice.

She started and let the iron fall, and did not heed that it was burning the lilac frock—the gown which, so short a while since as this year's spring, had pleased Reuben Gaunt. They stood there—David on the threshold, Cilla at the table—and they looked at each other in silence, asking some big question.

"You may come in, David," she said at last.

He came and stood beside her, after taking up the iron and setting it on its stand with the instinct of a good workman.

"The lilac gown is burned right through, Priscilla."

"It has served its time, David. Did you come to Good Intent just to tell me I was careless with my ironing?"

"No, I didn't." The smith had grown resolute again. "I came to tell you that I'm sailing Tuesday o' next week for Canada."

She was stunned for the moment. David had thought her bonnie since he knew her first, but never bonnie as she was just now, with the sunlight on her drooping head, her fingers plucking at the scissors on her girdle.

"I've ta'en time to make up my mind, I own," he went on stubbornly, "but 'tis made up now. My aunt Joanna, over-seas yonder, is a lile bit like Widow Lister; she's helpless without the goodman she nagged into his grave, and she won't take no from me. She's fonder o' nephew David these days than ever she was when she had him close under her hand. She wants something done for her, ye see."

Cilla glanced up at him, then down again. "What—what has made you in such haste to leave, David?"

"Haste, ye call it? I've been for going ever since April came in; and putting off makes a job no easier."

"You'll be glad to leave Garth and see bigger countries?"

Priscilla could not understand herself. It seemed to her that she wished to hurt David in some way; she was surprised, ashamed, that news of his going should have such power to move her.

"Glad to leave Garth?" echoed David, his blue eyes wide with question. "Never that, lile Cilla. As 'tis, I should never have dreamed o' going if there'd been you to keep me here."

"*Could* I keep you, David?"

"Oh, lass, don't play with me. I cannot bear it. I'll go easier, all the same, for knowing all is finished between you and Gaunt o' Marshlands."

The iron was cold by this time, but Cilla passed it idly to and fro across the lilac gown. "Yes, all is finished—and—and—I'm, oh, so glad, David! So very glad!"

In token of it she burst into tears, and David put an arm about her. "Lile lass, let me bide f' Garth. See the love I'm giving ye—asking so little, Oilla, and giving so much—giving so much, my lass!"

Priscilla looked up slowly, and regarded him with a long, steady glance. Life was so great a matter, and she was so weak to cope with it. If David would only give little to her, and ask her to give much in return; if he would be less patient and more masterful; if he would find some way of taking her perplexities into his hands and riving them to pieces; if he would be devil-may-care for once, as Gaunt had been in the spring, the girl felt that she might bid him stay in Garth.

It was their moment, and they let it pass. David was too diffident, seeing the girl here in the sunlight, to brush aside the cobwebs that hindered her true vision. It needed a rude hand to do it, and David's hand was gentle, as the hands of good men are when they are free of smithy-work. Oilla was too unsure of everything to yield to a touch less firm than downright mastery. She waited for him to speak, and found only that he was looking at her—a more honest dog than Gaunt, may be, but with the same waiting look in his eyes that Reuben had carried since the jaunty days of spring.

"You are so—so dumb, David," she said impatiently.

"Ay. I was never one to talk much, Oilla. I'm one to feel, for all that. Time and time I fancy I'm a bit like Billy the Fool—loving the dust o' Garth street when you walk along it, because 'tis you that passes, yet never finding a word to put to 't."

Oilla's strength was nearly spent. The heat of the merciless summer, her loneliness since Gaunt had chosen otherwise, the constant peril of the black fever brooding round the village, had sapped her courage. And David was so sure of himself, so clean of his heart and his hands. She liked and needed him.

She remembered Gaunt, recalled each trivial detail of

the day when she had gone by coach to Keta's Well wearing a maiden heart. She thought of the homeward walk, of the throstle-calls and April's keen young vigour, while Gaunt stepped beside her, and talked, and took her unawares. She shrank in fancy from the kiss that he had given her at the gate.

"No, David, no," she said. Her eyes were wet, but she was not afraid to look him in the face. "I'm not proud of Reuben Gaunt—not proud of him at all—but I'm glad of the love I gave him, though—though it died, David."

David took a long glance at the room—at the plants on the window-sill, at the settle which had found him on many a bygone night passing slow talk and pipe-reek with John Hirst across the hearth. Then he looked at Cilla and stood there—strong, and good to see, and diffident—and his air was that of a man who steps into a church. It had been always his way when Cilla was in sight.

"Why, then, good-bye, lile Cilla," he said abruptly. "There's much to be done if I'm to get off by Tuesday."

"David, David! you must not go like this, thinking me unfriendly. David, I could never bear to be unfriendly to you."

She had moved to his side, and in perplexity had laid both hands upon his arm.

"You will not understand," she went on hurriedly. "I shall miss you from Garth. I shall look for you three times a day. The homeland will be emptier, David."

"Then, lass, why won't ye wed me?"

"I cannot tell. I think women have no second love to give—though why it should be so, God knows. But so it is, David! I could never feel for you what I felt for another when we walked by the field-ways home to Garth."

It seemed strange to Cilla that she felt no shame in the confession. She would have shrunk from it at another time; but now it was only of David she thought—of David, who deserved more than she could give him—of David, who

asked for honesty, though she longed to keep him here in Garth.

"That's true," he answered quietly. "Neither man nor woman has second love to give. But there's this to say, Cilla. Time and time, when you're alone on the moor-top, a will-o-the-wisp comes 'ticing ye into the marshes. True love is true love, lass, and 'tis steady-like; it doesn't dance like a light-heeled clown at the fair."

Priscilla was tired, and saw life hidden, as the street of Garth was hidden by the sick, grey dust that cried to the skies for wholesome rain.

"You're thinking of Reuben Gaunt?"

"Ay, just of Reuben Gaunt—no more, no less." David was watching her eagerly, not as a lover now, but with a dog's look when he sees his mistress running into danger.

Cilla thought again of that spring journey out to Keta's Well and home again. It called to her still, like the song of a lavrock up above the pastures when spring is wild about the land. Gaunt's words were in her ear. The kiss she had given him at the gate, the sweet of the growing grass, the surrender and the glamour of it, and the big lands stretching out before her—Priscilla remembered every moment of that day. She knew that David was right when he named the glamour a will-o'-the-wisp; but she did not wish to know it; she resisted the knowledge with a curious, headstrong passion that she rarely showed.

"We are to part friends?" she said in a low, unsteady voice. "You choose a queer way of saying good-bye. There was no need to speak of Mr. Gaunt at all, still less to speak ill of him."

"This is not like you, Cilla," David answered quietly.

She was repentant at once. "No, 'tis not like me. You meant it well; but, David, you are clumsy."

Again the longing came to her to keep him here in Garth. The shadow of a great helplessness lay over her, and from one moment to the next she did not know her mind.

"David," she said, by-and-by, "do you guess what they will say if you leave Garth now, with the fever all about us?"

"I never try to guess what they'll say, lass. What I do is enough for me."

Oilla, still hating this random mood of hers, could not hold back the words. "They'll say you choose a wise time for leaving, after thinking about it all these months. They'll say you are as frightened of the fever as other folk. They'll say that you're a coward, David."

"They'll be liars, then, Oilla. I'm a man o' my hands, with no time to waste in fearing. The fever—well, it finds ye or it doesn't, and that's in God's hands."

Priscilla looked at him for a moment, as a child looks for a guiding hand. "I—I was wrong to say that. No one dare say that you were frightened. David, what ails me that I want to quarrel with my oldest friend?"

The smith was gentleness itself, now that he had put hope behind him and was nerving himself to face years which would be empty enough and lonelier than he cared to realise just yet. "Tis the heat, Oilla. We're all wearied out, I reckon. Quarrel wi' me? You could as well quarrel with yond grandfather's clock i' the corner while it's saying *tick-tick* to ye all day long and never changes tune."

Oilla laughed uneasily. "That is the reason, maybe. I'm fond of the old clock, but sometimes—oh, David! I'm weary of its steadiness—~~and~~ yet I should cry my heart out if—the clock was not ticking in the corner."

He should have seen her need of guidance, should have taken her random hint that he might try a change of note, even if his voice were unaccustomed to it and sounded out of tune. But David had made up his mind that morning, after long indecision, and his face was set toward a lonely country.

"Best listen to the old clock, for all that, Oilla. It doesn't go fast, but it goes for a long while. Well, there's

a deal to be done if I'm to get off by Tuesday o' next week."

He took a last glance at Oilla, at the house-place, at the lilac frock that lay on the ironing-board, and without a word he stepped out into the dusty street. And, after he had gone, Priscilla of the Good Intent sat down at the table, and laid her head on it, and sobbed bitterly; but whether the tears were for David or herself she did not know.

David went down the street. He carried a big air; and his face, if sad at all, wore only the dignity of grief, not its self-pity. He was of the brave folk, and in times of stress there came to him something of that spaciousness which is attached to kingship of all kinds.

He found Fool Billy leaning against the door of the forge. Billy, thinking the more because he said so little, had watched the smith go up the street, had divined his errand by the same instinct which befriended him in his comradeship with birds and beasts, and now he knew from one glance at David's face what was in the doing.

"Ye'll be leaving this right pleasant spot?" he asked.

David was too accustomed to the other's intuition to feel surprise. "Ay, I'm leaving Garth. And, lad, I've something to say to ye."

"Well, then, have ye a fill o' baccy, an' may be a lile match to light yond same? Smoke's a fearful help to a daft body's head-piece."

The smith waited till Billy was drawing tranquil puffs, then put a hand against the smithy wall and leaned there, a figure of strength and self-reliance.

"I shouldn't like the forge to pass into other hands, Billy. There's been one o' my name here since the year One, or nigh about, and 'twouldn't be seemly like to have another name above the door. Now, see ye, lad, suppose we call it play to set you here as master-smith? 'Tis ever so much more play-work than blowing bellows, come to think of it."

"Te-he!" laughed Billy. "Am I to play wi' all your big, fine tools, David?"

"Ay, just that. I've taught ye the way of them, and Dan Lister's lad from Brow Farm shall come and blow the bellows for you."

"Will that be work for Dan Lister's lad, or play?"

David caught the other's meaning with a quickness that he might well have shown when saying good-bye to Cilla. "Hard work, Billy—grievous hard work, while you're just playing at making horseshoes, fence-railings, and what not."

"And I'm to play at making horseshoes?" went on Fool Billy, smoking quietly into the face of the stark, blue sky and the heat of the mid-day sun. "I'm to play at smithy-work, while Dan Lister's lad goes sweating hard at bellows-blowing?"

David nodded as he filled his own pipe and lit it, while he leant against the smithy wall. "It will be rare fun for ye, Billy—the lad working hard as ever he can sweat at the blowing, and ye just pleasuring wi' making good horseshoes."

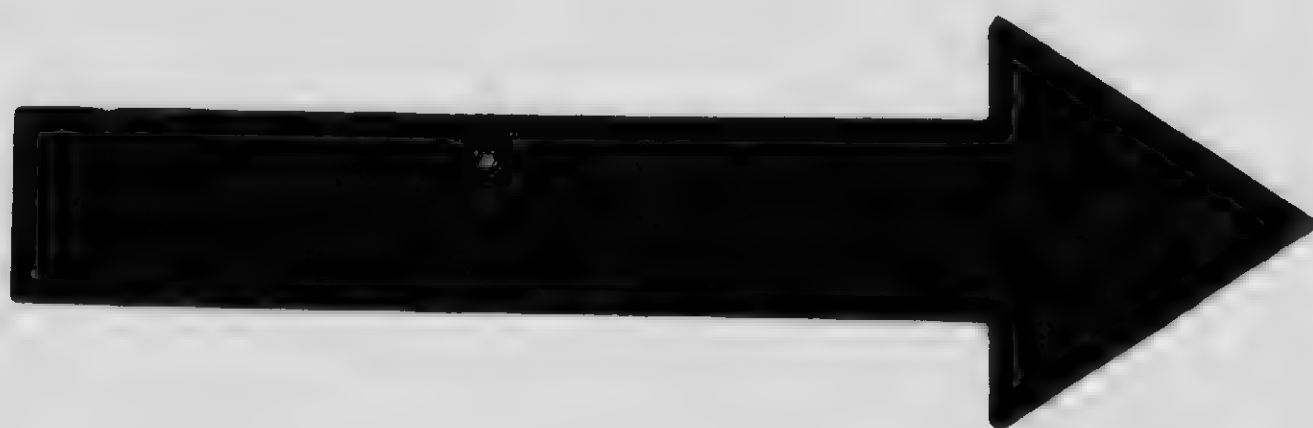
"It will be that!" said the natural. "Fancied bellows-blowing was a pastime, I, but now I see it just contrary-like. Dan Lister's lad will be the fool, sweating at the bellows, and I shall be master-man. Te-he, David the Smith!"

"Ay, te-he!" growled the other. "Get the bellows blowing, for there's work needs doing if I'm to get off by Tuesday o' next week."

Billy obeyed. He had little gift of speech, but had the rarer quality of sympathy; and he knew, in his own odd way, how matters stood with the master of the forge.

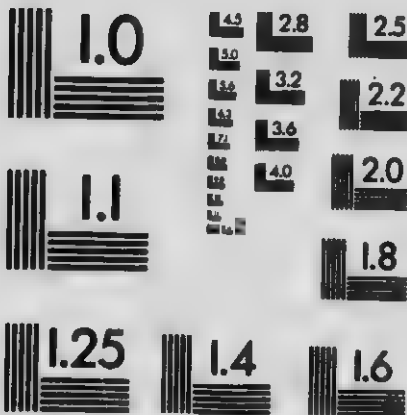
The smith did not move from his place against the wall until his pipe was smoked out. Then he gave a glance along the dusty road that led to Good Intent and went into the forge, where Billy was making the furnace roar.

"I've met odd folk and queer happenings i' my time," he said; "but the queerest o' the lot is life itself—just life as we're living it, Billy."



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"That's true, master," said Fool Billy. "Life's terrible pranksome-like—needs penning up time and time, he does, like yond prideful turkey-cock o' Farmer Hirst's."

"Ay," said David, as he set to work. "The trouble is that ye cannot pen him up. Put life on two legs or on four, Billy, and set me face to face wi' him, and I'd not grumble."

The fool answered nothing, but played gently with the bellows. And the smith worked fiercely at his anvil. And the sick, dusty afternoon wore on, bidding all who had time for idle thoughts to remember how near the fever lay to Garth.

CHAPTER XV

LINSALL FAIR

DAVID caught the early morning coach on the Tuesday, though he all but missed it through remembering a bit of smithy work that must be finished off before he left for Canada. That was David's way ; he would not leave Garth owing the least debt to any man, and promises of work, to be finished at such and such a date, he had always counted debts of honour.

There was a little crowd about the Elm Tree Inn, and up above the folk's heads he could see the mail-driver, sitting high on the box-seat of the coach and showing signs of good-humoured impatience to be off.

"Hi, David !" called the driver, catching sight of the other a hundred yards away. "You're in no hurry to leave Garth, it seems, but I am. I carry the Queen's letters, and Her Majesty—God bless her !—will want to know why I'm late to-day with her post-bag."

David was sorrowful enough, and the tears were nearer than he liked to those steady, blue-grey eyes of his ; but he did not mean to let Garth know it. He held his head high and did not quicken his steady pace.

"Oh, the Queen won't mind," he answered. "Just tell her it was David that kept her waiting, and she'll understand."

A shade of perplexity crossed his face as he neared the knot of folk who pressed round the coach. There were apt to be idlers about the inn-front at this hour ; the passing of the mails was the big adventure of each day's tranquil

round; but this morning there was clearly something unusual on foot.

"What is it?" asked David. "Is there a wedding or a fairing Shepston way, and me not heard of it?"

And then it was brought home to him that he was the centre of the crowd, and he flushed like a great, shy lad to find himself a hero. Their welcome was so spontaneous, their affection so simple and so boisterous, that David's modesty was shocked. He had been accustomed to do his work in Garth, to walk up and down its street with the proud and ready courtesy of a man whose hands are strong and whose heart is clean; and the village had accepted his presence in its midst as it accepted the sun when it shone, or the rain when it watered their growing crops. It was only now, at the parting of the ways, that Garth fully understood what it was losing.

The driver gave them little time to show their feelings. He had kept the seat beside him on the box for David—if seat it could be called, seeing that most of it was littered by mail-bags picked up from half a dozen scattered villages—and he motioned to David to clamber up by the fore-wheel. The crowd would not allow it, though, and lifted him with a "Heave-ho! All together, lads!" And David was thankful that the mail-bags broke his fall a little as he was hoisted to his place.

Then hampers were passed up, and small, round butter-baskets, and parcels wrapped clumsily in thick brown paper. Each was a tribute from some one among the villagers who had felt no need till now to express his regard for David the Smith; and each had a dozen eggs in it, or a spice-loaf, or some other farewell gift of viands, until David broke into a laugh.

"Nay, lads, nay!" he protested. "'Twill take another horse to help pull all these parcels to Shepston, let alone a few odd men to help me get through what's inside them."

"Oh, tuts!" roared John Hirst, striving to hide his real sorrow for David's going. "'Tis a long step and a far from

Garth to Canada. You may very well be hungry 'twixt this and there."

"The Queen's waiting," said the driver, as he flicked the mail-bags with the end of his whip.

Cilla slipped from the shelter of her father's shoulder, and came and reached up a hand to David. He could make nothing of the girl's face, for it was both gay and downcast. He felt something slipped into his palm, he heard her bid him a quiet farewell, and she was gone. The team of three started forward, and a shrill cry came to them from behind.

The driver pulled up, as if by instinct—an instinct he despised—and Widow Lister ran panting to the coach. She brought no gift, but then no one would expect it from a widow-body.

"I couldn't let ye go without saying good-bye, David," she said, out of breath. "Besides, I want ye to take a message to your aunt Joanna yonder i' Canada. 'Tis fifteen years and a day since she borrowed a saucepan fro' me, and went off at her marriage and forgot to send it back."

"Widow, we're late," said the driver, his good temper near to breaking-point.

"Ay, but you'll tell Joanna, David, that it isn't as I want the saucepan back. 'Tis lurned through t' bottom by now, no doubt, but I'm not one like to bearing a grudge all these years. If she'd only say she was sorry, now——"

The driver flicked his whip; and the white road slipped behind them; and David had started on the track to Canada.

For a half-mile the driver was silent. Then he spoke, looking steadily at his horses' ears.

"Seems to me that one o' two things is going to happen," he said. "Either Widow Lister is bound to leave the Road, or I am. There's not room for the two of us."

He waited for David's answer, and getting none, went forward with his grievance, not troubling to turn his head.

"A woman that can carry a saucepan grudge for fifteen years—gee up, lass Polly; we've time to make up!—is a

woman that scares a man. 'Tis not just that," he broke off, still flicking the ears of his team with a gentle, contemplative whip, as if he were casting for trout. "'Tis not just that bothers me. 'Tis her durned queer way o' being out o' breath, and growing plumper on it every day, and holding up the mail three days out of seven, year in, year out. And the widow chooses her three days—days when we chance to be late, I mean."

The dust went by them faster and faster; for the mailman prided himself on reaching Shepston to the minute, though he hated this over-driving of good cattle.

"The widow's never grown up," he went on, cheerful and happy-go-lucky again, now that he had vented his grievance. "She'll be a bairn o' six years old till she dies. That's her ailment, and that's why we humour her, I reckon. Yet she married a fairish sensible man, and ought to have learned summat by now. Get along, lass Polly; we've time to make up, I say. She was left a widow too young, maybe."

Another mile went by, broken only by a farrar lass who held up the coach like a gentle highwayman, handed a letter and a penny to the driver, and smiled at him. The out-lying farmsteads posted their letters in this haphazard fashion, and neither the driver nor the maid said a word to each other; they were too friendly to need words, as it chanced, for he was pledged to marry her within a month or two.

The next mile passed them, dusty and white. The sun beat down on them, and there was not a cloud to hide the glare—the glare that kept black fever close to Garth's borders.

"There's no good news from Shepston, David," said the driver by-and-by. "Every day there's the same tale when I drive in—more folk down wi' fever, and bodies waiting to be buried because the coffiners are feared to go nigh them. I'm tough myself, but I'm getting a lile bit nervous. They never stop talking, ye see, instead o' letting it be;

and a man can't help thinking o' what's being dinned into his ears by everybody he meets. Bless me," he broke off, with a quiet laugh, "I've got that bad I'm finding myself looking at Shepston passengers when they get aboard the mail —looking to see if there's any mark of fever on their faces."

His companion was still silent, and at last it struck the driver that something was amiss. He turned his head, and checked his flow of gossip suddenly. He had not seen steady David in this mood before.

A half-mile out from Garth the smith had opened his right hand, and had glanced eagerly to see what parting gift Cilla had left there when she said good-bye. He found a sprig of rosemary; and because he had held it so long in his hot palm, half fearing to look at it, the scent of the herb stole up to him. For rosemary, like her kindred herbs and kindred gentlewomen, has the gift of giving out fragrance to the hand that bruises it.

It was the scent that drove David's wits away, that rendered him deaf to chatter, blind to the garish road in front of him. It meant so much, now that Garth was left behind; it brought each corner of the old, grey street to mind. He could scent again the wood-reek curling sleepily from chimney-stacks of twenty shapes and sizes, the wall-flowers blooming in Widow Lister's strip of garden, the strong, lusty smell of the forge when his hammer rang on red-hot iron. A sickness to return laid hold of him. The rosemary had given its message, and David was fighting with his impulse to get down from the coach and tramp home again to Garth.

Then another thought came to him. Who did not know that rosemary stood for remembrance? There was not a child in Garth but could have told him what the herb's meaning was. In some special way, rosemary had been, time out of mind, the guardian herb of Garth; it thrived in every garden; it grew along the street front wherever a strip of soil had been rescued from the highway. Without rosemary the village would not know its

face ; and Garth folk, when they wished to praise Cilla overmuch behind her back, said that she was just like rosemary.

Did she wish him to return ? Had she chosen this maidenly token of a change of mind ? Little wonder that David could find no answer ; for Cilla herself, in these days of trouble and indecision, could have given him none. The driver had talked of Widow Lister, of the fever, and what not ; but David had sat with folded arms, watching the road slip by and trying to grasp his purpose, one way or the other.

It was the turning-point of Cilla's life and his, and once again modesty played him an ill-turn. He was a big fool, he told himself, to go thinking Cilla would marry a dull, workaday fellow. She was made for daintier wooing than he could give. Oh, ay, to be sure she liked him well enough, and remembrance meant just that—no more.

"Seems to me you're in the middle of a day-dream, David," said the driver, after a long look at him.

David pulled himself together, and his slow, patient smile broke across the firmness of his lips. "I was," he answered. "And now I'm out o' the dream. They want no wool-gatherers in Canada yonder, so they tell me."

"And ye never heard a word o' what I said about the black fever ? 'Tis all well enough for those who're leaving it, but I tell ye I'm glad to get out of Shepston every morn, and see the fells again, looking clean and wholesome-like ; though, bless me, I've nigh begun to look at *their* faces, too, to see if there be any mulberry patches on 'em. Mulberry patches, David ! Shepston 'folk won't let ye forget the fever-signs. Gee up, mare Polly ! We're late, and the Queen's waiting for us."

"As for me," said David, "I look on the fever this way. You get it, and you die ; or you don't get it, and you live. Either way, what's bound to happen is going to come, and crying won't mend it."

"That's true," assented the driver, cheerily, after due consideration of the point. "Be durned, David, but you've

a gift o' common sense. Thought I had the gift, too, till I took to looking for mulberry patches in honest people's faces."

When they neared Shepston the smith turned for a last look at the fields, raking up into the white-hot limestone glare that beat upon the dale he loved.

"'Tis good-bye, I reckon, lile Oilla!" was his thought.

Reuben Gaunt had not joined the company that met to give David a farewell at the inn. With all his fickleness, he was no liar to men, and he disdained to make a show of friendship when he knew that there was open enmity. Instead, he remembered that it was Linsall Fair Day, and he walked up the moor to Ghyll Farm. The moor, by contrast with the dusty lower lands, was cool, though even here the breeze was languid, halting, sick of the reeking sunlight and the hard face of the sky.

Gaunt found the farm door open, and stepped in; Peggy Mathewson was busy baking bread, and she looked hot and tired. The heat of the kitchen, the smell of the loaves, drove Gaunt into the shelter of the porch again.

"Phew! I thought 'twould be cooler indoors than out, Peggy!"

"Did ye? My temper's not cool to begin with, Reuben—or should I say 'Mr. Gaunt' these days?"

"Reuben, I fancy."

"I like to know. Ye change so often, and your station varies so—now marrying proud little Good Intent, and then again bending down to take notice o' Peggy Mathewson——"

"I've a cure for your temper, Peggy," he said, with an easy laugh. "We'll go to Linsall, and your loaves can wait."

"Why to Linsall?" she asked, with a longing glance at the moor. "Oh, ay, 'tis fair day! I've nigh forgotten fairs, and ribbons, and such-like idleness since you came home again. What with work, and what with trying to keep up with your cantrips, Reuben, I'm kept busy."

He only laughed, and switched his leggings with the riding-crop which, from sheer habit, he was carrying. The girl's tongue might be bitter, but her eyes told another tale. "Let's get away, Peggy! A scamper always does you good. As for the baking——"

"It's finished!" she broke in, setting down the last batch of loaves from the oven. "And if it weren't—why, I fancy I shouldn't heed."

The old recklessness was in her voice, the old longing for light-heartedness, though under it all she knew that there was grief and heaviness. She went upstairs, and was down again before Gaunt had time to grow impatient.

"Shall I shame ye at the fair?" she demanded, standing frankly for his inspection, her colour heightened, her hands resting on her hips.

Reuben noted the red scarf, the touches of colour which she had added deftly here and there to a dress which had seen many fairs and many weathers. No other lass could have worn such colours. They were gypsyish, bold, reckless, like Peggy herself, and they seemed to add to her beauty and her self-assurance.

"Shame me!" laughed Reuben. "There'll be eyes for none but ye at Linsall!"

She closed the porch-door behind her and stepped out into the sunlight. "'Twill be enough for me if I keep *your* eyes fro' roaming for a whole day at a stretch. Eh, well, I'm a fool to go wi' ye, and mother will wonder what's got me when she comes back from selling eggs i' Garth. But then she's used to wondering, is mother," the girl added, with a sudden, hard wistfulness in her voice. "It seems to come natural to us Mathewsons."

As they breasted the moor, however, Peggy's spirits rose. She had a day's freedom before her—and Reuben's company—and there was no need to vex herself with the question why he, and he alone, had power to take her natural good sense away.

They followed one of those winding moor-roads, set

between low banks of bilberry and ling and wild thyme, which seem ever to hide some swift adventure at the next turning. Peggy, bred in the midst of these wide, sweeping uplands, had found all her childish fairy-ales, all her make-believe of battle and romance, among the moors. The gypsy-wildness in her needed colour, warmth, the speed of strange adventures; as a child, and later as a woman, she had peopled the heath with voices other than the curlew's and the plover's. The countless hollows, bottomed by rank mosses and deep bracken, hid ambushed men behind each hillock that concealed the track from her. She would look for some figure to come riding down to meet her; and no toil about the farm, no harshness of the workaday life which hemmed her in at Ghyll, had killed this glamour of the heath. It was this need of glamour which long ago had bidden her set her heart on Gaunt; the man's queer eyes, with the look in them of devilry and yet of boyish surprise at life, his irresolution, the very uncertainty from one day to the next whether he would come tame to her hand, or would be wooing elsewhere, all enticed Peggy, as the winding hill-tracks did that promised some gallant meeting at the next corner—always at the next corner.

To-day she looked neither forward nor behind. She crossed the moor with feet as light as Gaunt's, and he laughed when they reached the top and halted to take breath.

"You're just a wild moor-bird, Peggy."

"And why not, Reuben? I was hatched in a moor-nest."

The day's heat had brought its own recompense in a measure, for a haze was creeping up from the heath, softening the glare. The breeze was quick up here and almost cool. Far down below them they could see Linsall village and its bridge resting like a small, grey Paradise in the cup of the tall hills.

"You were hatched in the pastures," went on Widow Mathewson's lass, after a silence. "There's a difference always 'twixt moor-nestlings and pasture birds."

"Oh, I don't know! I'm fond o' the moor myself."

"Ay, fondish—as ye are o' women. But, eh, lad, ye've no love o' the heather, and the smell of a marsh when it yields to your foot and all but gets ye under. 'Tisn't the same to ye, Reuben. Ye've always a back-thought for the pastures, green i' winter, an' green i' spring, and never a change. They're snugger, Reuben, and snugness was always to your liking."

Gaunt only laughed, and they ran down the track, hand in hand, till they reached the wall that guarded the intaken fields. Linsall village was bigger to them now, and they could see that it was thick with folk.

"There'll be dancing on the green to-night?" said Peggy, after they had climbed the wall and were walking soberly down the long, raking fields that led them to the Linsall road. "Well, I feel like dancing, Reuben. My feet were never so light under me."

"Oh, now, be quiet!" muttered Reuben, with a touch of superstition and a passing sense of disquiet. "We're not near a rowan tree, Peggy, to touch it for luck when we boast."

"We'll chance it, Reuben! I seem to have no wish at all, save just to dance and dance wi' ye on Linsall Green. 'Tis my head, maybe, that's light, and not my heels."

They were on the road now, and Peggy's mood grew lighter still as she saw the booths, the tents, the knots of chattering country-folk that covered Linsall Green. She relished the open admiration shown her as she passed; she welcomed the sly gibes of a few ill-natured and plainer women, for she knew that Reuben would like her better if she were the admitted beauty of the day. This strapping lass, with the clear judgment and the capable hands whenever life's work had to be done, was in playtime as simple as a child. Gaunt was her good fairy to-day; she loved him with a passionate devotion that asked only to be near and please him.

They went into the tavern whose front stretched orderly,

and long, and grey, the whole width of the green. Gaunt made her drink wine with their meal; the taste of it was thin and reedy to her, but she was pleasing Reuben. The glass from which she drank it, too, was shapelier than any she had seen; and she praised the wine, and the meal, and the sunlight that blazed on the white road outside the window.

Peggy laughed quietly as they went out into the glare again. "If I never enjoy a day again," she said, "I mean to take my fill o' this one."

Again Gaunt felt a touch of uneasiness, but shrugged his shoulders, as his way was, and thought no more of it. If he had lived nearer to the Border, he would have said that Peggy o' Mathewson's was fey; as it was, he wondered that he had played yes and no with this girl. Her beauty, her high spirits, the disregard she showed for all admiration but his own, were pleasant to the man. For months he had been dallying with his promise to Oilla of the Good Intent that he would marry Peggy. Well, who knew what might happen on this fine day in Linsall?

"Peggy," he said, as they threaded their way across the green, "you need a string of corals round your neck to set off all the bonnie rest o' you. I saw a necklace as we came past the far booth yonder."

And a wonderful booth it was, this wooden counter set on trestles, with a span of canvas overhead to keep sun or rain away. There were toys on it, and flat-irons, and housewives' "find-alls"; there were wooden pipes, and clay pipes, and snuff-boxes. Bethrothal-rings and wedding-rings and teething-rings lay neighbours to packets of simples warranted to remedy many ailments. The whole sum of life, its hopes, its absurdities, its random search after pleasure, or for ease from pain, seemed to lie within the narrow confines of the booth.

Gaunt took down one of the coral necklaces, and the woman standing behind the counter gave the pair of them a keen glance.

"How much?" asked Gaunt.

The woman's thoughts were rapid. Were they brother and sister? No. It would have been sixpence in that case. Had he just met with the girl, and was he playing with a fancy? She thought not. That would have meant a shilling. Were they newly pledged to each other?

"Half a crown," said the woman quietly. "They're the best coral money can buy, and I can only sell 'em so cheap as that because——"

"Oh yes," put in Gaunt, drily. "Here's the money. Now, Peggy, let me fasten it on for you—there! I told you 'twas all that was needed to set off the rest of you."

Peggy felt a touch on her arm, and turned to find a plump rascal with a pedlar's tray in front of him. His face, a dusky red at all times—what between weather outside inn-walls and warmer cheer within them—was a deeper colour than its wont this morning, though his eyes were quick and roguish, and his spirits gay as ever.

"Ah, now, Peggy o' Mathewson's, come away from the booth," he said. "Mother Lambert there has to pay for her stall, and the keep of a horse to drag it about fro' place to place. Stands to reason her wares are dear to buy. Now Pedlar Joe is his own pony—carries his booth in front of him, in a manner o' speaking, and can afford to sell things cheap."

"Ay," put in Mother Lambert, tartly, from behind her booth, "cheap to buy and dear when ye've got 'em. We all know *your* wares, Pedlar Joe."

The pedlar sighed, and mutely called the high fells to witness that he needed no defence. "Women are that jealous," he observed. Then, with a whimsical glance at Reuben: "Mr. Gaunt, 'tis ye that's brought the Pride o' the Fair to Linsall. Ye'll have to buy her one of these lile scarfs. Peggy's fond o' bright colours, as she's a right to be."

Gaunt laughed as he put a hand in his pocket, for the pedlar was as well known for twenty miles around as

Kilnhope Crag, and he came and went like the wind, a chartered libertine.

"Fond of bright colours, is she? Like your face, Joe, I take it; and, by that token, you've been polishing it a lile bit more than usual."

"Ay, I've been out in the sun more than usual," said the other, shamelessly. "Wonderful chap the sun is for giving good colour to a body's face. Now, Peggy, see this crimson scarf here—for old time's sake, Mr. Gaunt, ye shall have it cheap for three-and-six."

"Say one-and-six," suggested Gaunt, lazily.

"Naw," said Joe, with dignity. "I may be poor, sir, but I'd not go bargaining when there's a lady nigh. Three-and-six I said, and *two-and-six* I stick to."

Peggy and Gaunt moved away as soon as the bargain had been completed, and Pedlar Joe strolled up to the booth. Mother Lambert and he were good friends enough, despite professional rivalry.

"Looks as if Gaunt and wild-bird Peggy might make a match of it, after all?" he hazarded.

"So that's Peggy o' Mathewson's?" answered the booth-woman. "I've not been nigh Linsall for four or five years, as ye know, and the lass was a little 'un then. I'd forgotten her. But Gaunt—there's no forgetting him: Maybe he's caught at last. I had the same fancy when I saw 'em step ower the green."

"Maybe!" chuckled the pedlar. "There's allus a 'maybe' when folk mention Reuben Gaunt. Reuben—it means summat like water, if I call to mind—water that's aye running under the brigg——"

Widow Lambert began to arrange her wares afresh. "Ay, like yourself, Joe—just like yourself. A caravan and a horse are steady matters, but a man wi' a naked pack on his back should go by the name o' Reuben."

So these two, vagrants both, fell into argument. Mother Lambert held the landed view of life, as befitted one who had a caravan and the right to fix her booth on

the green for this one day. Pedlar Joe argued nimbly for the honour of his calling, and his views were those of the unlanded folk, coloured through and through by talk of freedom, of leisure in which to snare game—as being no man's property in special—and of the joys attending one who, day in, day out, had only his pack and himself to think of.

The dispute was ended only when Joe caught sight of a country lass with a pretty face and an air of foolish vanity about her.

"I've to sell a scarf to Nancy Wood," he said, with a confidential wink at the booth-woman. "She's prattlesome now, and will buy, but she'll have no heart for 't once she's seen Peggy o' Mathewson's."

The pedlar sold his scarf; and the sun got down, half between noon and setting; and still the folk came pouring into Linsall. There was little news of the fever on this side of the moor-ridge; and, if there had been news, it would have been disregarded on this day when all the country-side was pledged to merriment.

"You're blithe, Peggy!" said Gaunt, as they moved about the green together.

"I should be," she answered, with a heedless laugh. "I'm free for a day, and I'm holding both hands out to catch whatever frolic comes."

CHAPTER XVI

THE QUIET WALK HOME

LINSALL was staid enough throughout the year, but, like Peggy Mathewson, she made the most of her big holiday. The cobbled inn-front, wide as it was, could hold no more farmers' gigs; the stable-yard was full of traps; and those who rode in late on sturdy horses were forced to seek billets for their nags wherever a friendly farmstead offered hospitality.

The bridge, arched like a delicate, grey eyebrow above the peat-brown river, was white with faces which looked constantly toward the inn, as if watching for some spectacle. The Squire was there, and his womenfolk, rubbing shoulders with yeomen and their wives; farm-hinds pressed close against the stonework of the bridge, and held their bairns up to see what was going forward. The green below was crowded, too, and men were running up the pastures that stepped briskly from the roadway to the moor. Only the road itself, from the fields right down to the inn-front, was clear of onlookers, and the dust of the highway showed hot and white as it made a lane between the folk.

It was time for the fell-race, and there were few dwellers in this land of climbing fields and overtopping hills whose hearts did not beat faster at prospect of the race. Of all their sports it was most in keeping with their daily lives. Each farmer, when he went to call the cattle into mistal, when he ploughed, or won the hay-crop, was compelled to do his share of climbing, for all the fields of Linsall, save a few that lay along the river's level, strode straight uphill.

This fell-race, indeed, was not so much a pastime as a test of endurance which had grown naturally out of their daily occupation ; and the winner of it was counted the great man of the year.

" Reuben," said Peggy o' Mathewson's, slipping a hand through his arm as they stood on the green, " the race is to start in less than half an hour, and I've a fancy."

" You've only to ask, if I can give it you."

" You must run, Reuben—and you must win."

" You're jesting ? Why, I'm all out of practice——"

" Oh, you're tough and hard ! I've only to look at you to see as much. You used to win 't easy enough i' the old days, Reuben—try, just to please me."

Gaunt laughed good-naturedly, and began to push a way through the crowd. " I'll do my best, Peggy ; but I shall be wild if I come home second, after being reckoned an easy first so long."

He borrowed running-gear from the landlord of the inn, and a low hum went up from the crowd when they saw him step out again into the sunlight. For it was known that one of the big fell-racers from the Lake Country had entered for to-day's struggle, and until now there had seemed no chance that Linsall could keep the honour within its own borders. At a meeting less happy-go-lucky and more set about with rules than this, there might have been trouble touching Gaunt's late entry. But Linsall's rule was that till the moment when the starter shouted " Go ! " any man was free to take his place along the line of runners.

As Gaunt moved quickly to the starting-point he was stopped by a shabby-genteel man, whose appearance seemed oddly out of keeping with the ruddy farmer-folk about him.

" Beg pardon, Mr. Gaunt, but you mean to run to-day ? " whispered the stranger.

Gaunt nodded ; he had followed horse-racing too long to have any doubt as to what was coming.

" You'll upset all our bets, then, and poor men have to

make their living. See now, Mr. Gaunt, you're well off, I know, but the richest need more, and if you've a mind to fall out of the race——"

Reuben Gaunt, if by force of nature he was a crooked man when his affections were in case, was scrupulously straight in other matters. With all his lack of self-guidance, he had no meanness; and the suggestion of the shabby-genteel man touched his temper to the quick.

"Here, lads," he broke in, turning to the group of strapping fellows who stood nearest to him, "here's one who wants me to run crooked for the sake of a five-pound note. Just cool his heels for him in the river."

It was all over before the crowd had time to realise the meaning of the uproar. The intruder into Linsall's peace was carried at a running pace to the pool under the bridge, was thrown in and seen to clamber up the further bank and seek cover like a fox. The farm-lads laughed and shrugged their shoulders, and went back to see the start of the race. They had upheld Linsall's reputation for a race run fairly and with keenness, and there was little chance that other out-at-elbows gentry would try to-day to disturb that reputation.

Gaunt took his place on the starting-line; there were nine of them—lean and wiry fellows all, since upland farming seldom makes for too much flesh—and next to Reuben was the Lake Country runner, Bownas by name. Long in the limb, lithe and spare of body, he dwarfed Gaunt by a good four inches, and seemed built for this business of capturing the race.

There were five minutes to go before the signal for the start, and Bownas looked Gaunt up and down. Finally he put out a hand.

"You're Mr. Gaunt? Pleased to run against you. I've heard o' you. Better a tough race than a slack one any day."

Gaunt's spirits were rising every moment. He laughed as he took the other's hand. "By the Lord, we'll show

them what running means, if they've never known it before."

He was heartened by the murmurs of the crowd behind him. "Gaunt's running to-day," said one, with a hint of hero-worship in his voice. "We'll keep the winner i' our own country yet," said another. The shabby-gentee's assumption that his bets were in danger had been in itself a tribute to his skill. Sympathy was a spur to Gaunt always, and he felt that the crowd was with him.

"You've to win, Reuben! Make no mistake o' that," murmured Peggy from behind. "I wouldn't have 'ticed ye to run at all if I hadn't been sure of your winning."

He turned and looked her in the eyes. "I begin to fancy I shall, Peggy," he said; "but 'tis long odds to put me up at a minute's notice against Bownas of Shap."

"Ready, are ye?" cried the starter. "Ready?—Go!"

There was no excitement at the beginning of the race, and this, too, was in keeping with the dalefolk, who liked their pleasure to be long-drawn out. It was only the raw youngsters who showed their paces along the dusty line of road; Gaunt and Bownas trotted quietly at the rear, remembering that a good deal of ground had to slip under their feet before the last swift struggle home.

The haze had lifted now, and the sunlight lay so keen on moor and pasture that those on the bridge, the remotest point of vantage, could see each figure as it climbed the pastures, could follow the men when they gained the darker background of the heath.

Not one of the nine was running now. All were creeping painfully up the breast of the moor.

"Gaunt's at his old game," said one of the crowd.

"Ay, he takes it straight as it comes. Sakes, how he sticks to his business!"

It was now that eagerness began to show itself among the onlookers. Much depended on the downhill scamper, but more on that stubborn climb up the hill-face which,

from below and in the sun glare, showed steep as a house-wall.

Bownas of Shap was playing his old game, too. They could see him turning warily along the dingles, instead of facing the high bluffs. He counted on saving wind and gaining speed, as he had done in other struggles of this kind; but he had not run against Reuben Gaunt before.

The onlookers—and every face now was turned to the moor with fine expectancy—could see Gaunt keeping a straight line for the summit, though now and then he seemed to be pulling himself forward by sheer grip of the heather, that hindered his feet no less than the steepness of the moor.

They were lost for awhile, Bownas and Gaunt, in the shadow of the highest ridge. At the ridge-top, pencilled clear against the hard blue of the sky, stood the turning-post and the man who guarded it. Then, out of the shadowed space, Gaunt's figure showed; he had gone straight as a gunshot, and, without turn or halt, had reached the flag.

Peggy could not rest quiet on the road below. She had climbed to the brink of the moor by now, and three or four of the crowd had followed her. It was Peggy's day, and she wished it to be full. Gaunt might be this and that, she told herself, her eyes fixed on the heath above; but she would forgive him fickleness and all if she could dance on the green to-night, and know that he was the winner of the race.

"Gaunt climbs like a wild-cat," said a tough old yeoman, standing at Peggy's side.

"Climbs like a man," answered Peggy, and kept her eyes on the hill-top.

Bownas had reached the flag by now, and had turned to follow Gaunt down the moor. From below, Peggy o' Mathewson's could hear the eager uproar of the crowd. None thought of the seven stragglers who followed; it was a race between the homelander and the "foreigner,"

and Gaunt himself, though the blood was surging in his ears, could hear a stifled echo of the roar that meant goodwill to him.

Gaunt had been used to say that he won his races because his wind was a special gift, in token that his legs were short. He needed the gift now; for, out of practice as he was, the hard, unswerving climb had punished him.

Bownas was still following his bent, downhill as uphill. He chose the gentler slopes, while Gaunt ran helter-skelter down, straight for the wall that guarded the pastures from the moor.

"The wild-cat's won!" shouted the old yeoman at Peggy's ear. "He's a furlong forrarder, and all easy going now."

A long, grey line of shale lay in Gaunt's path. He would not turn aside, but trusted to his old trick of sliding down it, feet foremost, with the shingle scattering round his knees.

"Oh, be durned!" muttered the yeoman. "'Tis all over with Gaunt! Just when he had the race in his hands, too."

Peggy's face was white, for she had seen the runner trip against a stone, which did not yield to his foot as the shale had done. So great was Gaunt's speed that he could not think of checking himself; head over heels he went, and landed on his feet again as if by a miracle. For a second or two he stood dazed by the shock, and Bownas got to within fifty yards of him. Then, shaking himself together, and setting his face as hard as a flint, Gaunt started down the moor again.

"He'll break his neck one day at yond job," said the yeoman to Peggy. "Glad he hasn't done as much to-day. We don't want any foreigner to win."

The runners were scaling the wall between moor and pasture now, and Gaunt was a trifle the quicker in getting over. He passed so close to Peggy that she could have touched him.

"Run!" she panted. "Reuben, you have it! You have it, lad!"

He heard her, and so did Bownas of Shap; and both men raced forward with a quickened sense of rivalry.

It was now that the crowd lost all restraint, save just as much as was needed to keep a clear path to the inn. From the bridge, and from the green, and from the inn-front—where men were standing on tip-toe in the gigs to get a clearer view—a deafening clamour rose. It was no spasmodic cheering, broken by silences, but a steady, ever-growing roar, like the thunder of a stream when snow is loosened from the hills. Never since this yearly battle of the fells first took its place in Linsall's history had such a race been watched. The time between out and home was shorter by five minutes than the fastest record known; but, more than this, there were two men left to fight it out to the end—two men who came with swift, lopping strides through the dust of the roadway—two men whose faces at another time would have been terrible to see, so contorted were they with weariness, and desperation, and fierce effort to keep up.

Bownas led by a few feet now, and the onlookers were making frenzied calls to Gaunt to make a last spurt for it. The uproar rose to the hills that hemmed in Linsall village, and it broke against the fells with muffled echo. It was a moment when a man might well prove stronger than himself, and a strange gaiety caught Reuben unawares. There were still two hundred yards to go, and he saw that Bownas was content to keep his lead, and was waiting for his last big effort until nearer home. Gaunt could not wait; he gathered all his strength, and glanced past Bownas with sudden speed, and crossed the winning-line with an impetus he could not check. The inn-doorway was in front of him—otherwise he would have crashed against the wall in his blind rush—and he ran down the long passage and checked himself when he reached the settle at the far end, and sat there with his head between his hands. A darkness and great sickness closed about him for awhile; then he

lifted his head, and saw the landlord standing near him with an air of much goodwill and some anxiety.

"Bring me something—something in a mug, Jonas," said Gaunt, with a feeble smile.

Jonas laughed, as he patted the other on the back. "You want to cure that durned, queer feel of emptiness, Mr. Gaunt. Oh, bless ye, I know it. I've run fell-races before; but never as you ran to-day. God bless me, ye've the legs of a deer!"

Peggy had seen from the pasture-fields how Gaunt came home far down below; and when she reached the village, it was to find the hero of the year being carried shoulder-high by six of the Linsall men. No leader of old, returning from victory through a crowded capital, could have claimed more honour than Reuben Gaunt. Unprepared, to gratify a lass's whim, he had won a contest that would go down in Garth's history, so long as there were folk to sit beside the hearth o' nights and talk of it.

Peggy o' Mathewson's had had her wish. A buoyancy, an exultation like Gaunt's own as he covered those last ten-score yards, possessed her. It was the woman's pride, unalterable through changing generations, that "her man" had won his battle.

When the evening came, and the sun dropped low over Linsall Moor, and the moon climbed big and round over the shoulder of Harts Fell, the green was full of couples dancing to the tune of three fiddlers perched on Mother Lambert's empty counter. And Peggy, though the men pressed round her like a swarm of bees, would dance with few but Gaunt.

The scene was fairy-like in its remoteness from the humdrum round of work. The fells on the one side were white and magical; the moor on the other showed a dark, jagged line of mystery; and between moor and fell, Linsall village lay steeped in fleecy moonlight, her bridge a slender arch of gossamer that spanned a stream of pearl and blue. There was no sound, save the gentle thud of feet on the

grass, the squeaks of the fiddles, the low, tranquil laugh of some country lass as she heard what her lover stooped to tell her in the pauses of the dance.

When Gaunt and Peggy left the green at last, and struck up the pastures toward home, they were followed by much nodding of heads and wagging of tongues.

"Gaunt's not content with winning the race, 'twould seem," said one.

"Nay," laughed another, "he seems set on winning Peggy o' Mathewson's as well. There'll be lile trouble i' that, if the look in her face be aught to go by."

Peggy and her man moved steadily up the field-track, then more quietly when they reached the heath.

"'Twas here you ran so well," said Peggy, her eyes shining with some great, unreasoning happiness.

"'Twas because you asked it," answered Gaunt, slipping her arm through his own as they turned to look down on moonlit Linsall. The faint screech of fiddles reached them, reedy as the breeze that blew fitfully about the heather-stems. She was silent, and Gaunt felt that she was trembling. "Why, what's amiss? Surely you're not cold on such a night?"

"Oh, it is naught, Reuben! I've had my day—as full a one as ever I could wish for—and I'm frightened, somehow, to go back, and begin to churn, and bake, and wash, and tend the fowls."

"I can ease you of all that."

Her eyes were soft, and full of the tenderness which life had tried its best to kill. She seemed about to speak, but checked herself.

"Will you listen, Peggy?"

"Oh, we must hurry, Reuben. Come away over the moor; there's mother wondering all this while whatever can have come to me."

He did not understand her mood, did not understand the withdrawal which was at once proud and full of mute appeal. They crossed the moor in a silence broken only by

the scuffle of a sheep as they wakened it in passing, by the sudden whirr of a cock grouse as he rose from the ling and went barking *to-bac, to-bac, to-bac* across the moor.

It was Peggy who broke the silence. They had reached the deep glen above Ghyll Farm, and she paused at the rowan-tree which branched across the dancing stream. She had spent long hours under shadow of the rowan before and after she had learned her love for Gaunt; the place was friendly to her, for it was haunted by familiar years.

She stood straight in the moonlight, facing him. The rowan-leaves threw feathery shadows across her face. "Reuben," she said, "what's amiss with us both?"

"Why, naught, lile lass. You want to be free of the churning and the rest? Well, there's Marshlands waiting for you, if you choose to come as mistress."

"Reuben!"

He could not tell whether sorrow or keen gladness lay underneath that cry. He knew Peggy o' Mathewson's had never moved him as she did to-night.

"Reuben, I'm all lost on the moor," she went on quickly. "I love the ground ye tread on, and yet I doubt ye. I've seen you a man to-day, Reuben, and yet I'm wonderin' g whether it can last. The mood's on ye to make me mistress yonder. Ay, but to-morrow? Love goes and comes wi' some folk, but it stays wi' women such as me. You need make no doubt o' that."

"It will stay with me. Are you going with the rest o' the flock, lile one—bleating me down, when I try to get my feet on a straight road?"

Peggy o' Mathewson's stood silent. The moonlight, dappled by the swaying rowan-leaves, showed a beauty that was scarcely of this world. Like the weather-stained mother who waited for her coming, down yonder at the farm, Peggy had peeped into a bigger life than this.

Suddenly she lost her straightness, and was sobbing in Gaunt's arms. "You'll be good to me, Reuben? 'Tis all

or naught wi' me, and you can break my heart, or mend it, just as you please. Oh, I should take shame to talk to ye like this—but I'll have no half-love from you if I come to Marshlands."

Gaunt felt a new warmth, a generous impulse, not only to take this passionate, headstrong lass to Marshlands, but to make her happy there. He told her as much in few words, and the answering touch of her hands as he held them roused something manlier, more robust, in the man's contrary nature.

They stayed awhile under the rowan, and Peggy touched its smooth trunk from time to time.

"I'm happy to-day," she laughed, "just happy, Reuben; and I'm touching rowan-wood while I say it."

There was a light in the kitchen of Ghyll Farm when it came across the croft, and at the porch-door they could see Widow Mathewson, her rugged figure softened by the moonlight.

"So ye've been wi' Gaunt? I guessed as much," was the mother's greeting. There was little complaint in her tone, but her usual half-sad, half-bitter acceptance of the day's troubles as they came.

Peggy was not contrite. "I'd finished the baking, mother, and I knew ye'd guess I was off to Linsall Fair. Mother, I never had such a day—and Reuben won the fell-race."

"Ay, he would. Give him a bit o' straight running for foolishness' sake, and he's clever; it's when you want him to do something useful that Gaunt fails ye—fails ye every time."

"I want you to ask me indoors for once," put in Reuben.

The widow looked at him curiously. Without emotion, as if she were counting up her egg-money, and finding the total right, she realized that there was a change for the better in him. His tone was grave, and he had lost his light, come-and-go air altogether.

"As ye please," she answered, stepping aside to let him

pass. "'Tis so late now for us early-to-bed folk that a bit later won't signify."

In grim silence she brought cake and elderberry wine from the corner cupboard, and set them on the table. Whether a guest were welcome or not, he must not leave without a show of hospitality.

"Just help yourself, Mr. Gaunt," she said, with a certain stateliness that was no way out of keeping with her rough gown and weather-stained, tired face.

"Oh, by, and-by," he said. Peggy and he were standing on either side of the hearth, and Widow Mathewson saw the confident, warm glance that passed between them. "We've something to tell you, Mrs. Mathewson. Peggy was pleased with my running, maybe—or perhaps she saw I was fondish of her—any way, she has promised to come down to Marshlands as mistress there."

Mrs. Mathewson began to stride up and down the floor. It was her way—the man's way—when deeply moved. Folly, disaster, she had looked for whenever Gaunt had crossed their path; she was not prepared for honesty.

"See ye," she cried fiercely, turning to meet Gaunt's eyes, "are ye meaning this? I tell ye, we're proud, bitter-proud, up here at Ghyll. I've no man to look after Peggy—the one I lost would have been littlish use even if he'd lived—but I was not built after a gentle pattern, Reuben Gaunt. If you're planning some fresh bit o' devilry, I'll bid ye keep clear o' my hands. They're strong hands—when I care to use them."

Reuben was at his ease for once in the widow's presence. This new sense of honesty was a gentler and yet a stronger feeling than he had known since childhood.

"'Tis this way," he said quietly, "we happen to want one another, and we're bent on getting one another."

"Ay, you're bent on it," said the widow, drily, not taking her eyes from Reuben's face. "You're bent on it to-night. The full moon glammers folk, so they say. Will ye be bent on it to-morrow?"

"Mother, you're hard on Reuben!" broke in Peggy.

"No harder than he's been on me, these years and years past. "Are ye playing wi' my lass, or are ye not? She's all I have, mind."

Gaunt would take no offence. His spirits were high, and that curious sense of well-doing was with him still. "I shall begin getting things to rights at Marshlands to-morrow. A house that has had no mistress all these years will need setting straight. After that, Peggy has only to choose the day when she'll come to it."

The widow softened a little, but she did not spare him. "Very well," she said, her fine, keen eyes reading every line of his face. "Ay, very well indeed, Reuben Gaunt, if ye can hold to the same mind two days running. When I see Peggy wedded I shall believe that Peggy's wedded. Good night to ye. I'm fair over-done with the day's work, while ye two were gadding over to Linsall Fair."

Peggy went with Gaunt to the gate of the croft. "Ne'er heed mother," she whispered. "'Tis her way, Reuben. She'll soften to you by-and-by."

"I heed naught, so long as you're lying lile and soft in my two arms. What a fool I've been all these years, Peggy!"

He was swept away by his passion, by the girl's free, reckless beauty and reckless tenderness. He pictured her down yonder in the lonely house at Marshlands. The liberty he had cherished—liberty to come and go as he listed, like the wind—was shorn of all attraction. There would be warmth and well-doing about his house, and ties to keep him safe from wandering.

They stood looking down the heath. The moon outlined each smooth ridge; her light nestled in the misty vagueness of the hollows; away and away to the grey-blue of the silent sky she touched the land with witchery. And Peggy o' Mathewson's sighed.

"Why, lass, you're shivering," said Gaunt, roused from his dreams of what might be.

"Oh, a goose walked over my grave," she answered lightly. "A silly goose, Reuben, to choose just to-day for wandering."

She did not tell him that she feared the day's happiness, feared lest all should be changed when she woke on the morrow. Hardship was more easy to believe in, after all, and in her experience it followed pleasure always.

They watched the moor, and the tenderness, the mute, uncomplaining sorrow of the land, came close to Peggy, as to one who had known the heath from childhood.

"Reuben," she sobbed, "if only you had one mind in a day, instead of fifty—or if I could care for ye less——"

"Best care for me more instead of less," laughed Reuben. "I've no heed myself for geese walking over a grave."

"It was silly, I own. There, ye've had kisses enough and to last——"

"Until to-morrow."

"Well—maybe—if ye come not too early, while I'm milking the cows, or not over-late, when the house will need looking to, after all the work I've given mother to-day. There, Reuben—oh, there and there, if ye must better the first—good-night, Reuben."

Gaunt swung down the moor. The moon stood silver-gold in the middle of the blue, round sky. Far down below he could see a light set like a little star above the porch of Marshland.

"They're used to my late home-comings," he laughed. "Well, there'll be fewer such when Peggy comes to Marshlands."

CHAPTER XVI

THE FEVER-DREAD

WHATEVER doubt Widow Mathewson might have of Gaunt's constancy, he himself felt none. On the morning after Linsall Fair he summoned his housekeeper, told her that Marshlands was to have a mistress at long last, and gave orders that the disused parlour, full of faded hangings and rusty furniture, unrenewed since his mother came here as a bride, should be turned out in readiness for the purchases he meant to make this week in Shepston. The best bedroom, disused too, was to be treated in the like fashion. Now that his mind had found anchorage, Reuben was eager, business-like, impatient of delays.

His housekeeper said little; but she smiled when his back was turned, and shook her head with foreboding that was her only luxury.

"He's like a lad going off to buy a gun, or a rod, or some such toy," was her thought. "Oh, ay, he's keen-set on the notion, and 'twill last a week, with luck. There never was a man to tire as soon as the master."

Gaunt did not tire, however; he was to and fro between Ghyll Farm and Marshlands every other day, and in between was journeying to Shepston, with Peggy beside him, in the smart, high-wheeled gig which was known by sight to all the dalesfolk.

Widow Mathewson said little these days, save to grumble that Peggy left her three-parts of the work to do; but at last she was losing some of her distrust of Gaunt. His gaiety appealed to her, for she had known but little of it

in her time ; his forgetfulness of all past differences between them was generous, though she only half admitted it. Above all, her headstrong lass showed likely to settle down at last, with a decent roof above her, and the right to show a pride which was ingrained in her.

"Maybe he's as well as another man," she would mutter, as she nursed her pipe by the hearth, and waited for Peggy to return, "though that's saying little enough. Come to think of it, there's so few worth choosing that a lass is almost bound to make a lile fool of herself when it comes to marriage."

They were to be married at the end of two months. That was the utmost Mrs. Mathewson would grant when Reuben pressed for an earlier day.

"If your fancy lasts for two months, it may last longer," she said drily, in answer to Gaunt's pleading. "My lass shall be thrown at no man's head, Reuben, least of all at yours."

To Peggy the waiting-time seemed short. Her child's dreams up among the winding peat-ways of the moor, her woman's yieldings to this first and last romance which Gaunt embodied, were of the same fibre. As time went by, and still the dream did not yield to each day's commonplace, she forgot her distrust of life, and took each moment as she had taken those stolen hours at Linsall Fair ; and Gaunt wondered that her beauty ripened, took a more subtle colouring, a comelier shape ; he did not know that hope was like sun-warmth to Peggy o' Mathewson's after the winter of her girlhood.

One day—it was a week after Linsall Fair—he did not take her with him to Shepston. He had a fancy to buy a chestnut mare he knew of, and keep it as a wedding-gift for her, letting her find it unexpectedly in stable when he brought her home to Marshlands. She could ride bare-back already ; he would teach her afterwards to sit a side-saddle.

Between Garth and Shepston he came face to face with

Cilla round a bend of the dusty road, and pulled his horse up.

"You have heard the news?" he asked, feeling oddly ill at ease.

"I hear so little. It is not father's way, nor mine." Cilla's glance rested quietly on him, and she stood a little straighter than her wont, with an air of withdrawal. "If 'tis the fever you mean, of course we've heard of it. They talk of nothing else these days in Garth."

"It was not the fever I meant. Do you remember that you asked me months ago to do something? We were standing just outside the porch at Good Intent."

Cilla flushed, and moved a pace or two away. "Yes, I remember. It is you, Mr. Gaunt, who seem to have forgotten your promise."

"We're to be married in October," he said bluntly.

For a moment she hesitated, then held out her hand. "I wish you well—indeed, I wish you both well. Though we hear so little gossip, they told me Peggy was queen o' the fair at Linsall. She deserved to be, I think."

With a smile and a bend of the head, she left him. He turned in the saddle to watch her go down the road, with her light, easy step, then plucked his horse into a trot. He was out of temper with the day, though he had begun it light-heartedly enough. His old infirmity had returned to him at sight of Priscilla; with the best will in the world to be loyal, he was bewildered by the grace and fragrance which Cilla had brought along this dusty road. His vanity was hurt, moreover; there had been no sign of regret or sorrow in Cilla's voice; her friendliness and unconcern were harder to bear than any of Widow Mathewson's downright attacks had been.

Priscilla moved more slowly, once she was out of sight. She was lingering in fancy through that day of spring when she and Gaunt had gone to Keta's Well. And she laughed at herself because the tears in her eyes were very near falling. Why should she grieve because he had done what she asked

of him? Since Keta's Well and all the folly of the spring there had been the merciless heat, the ruined hay-crop, the fever that would not enter Garth as yet, though the shadow of it lay constantly about the village.

"Ah, now, there's enough that is real to be thought of," was Cilla's way of meeting the fresh heartache. "Father would tell me, I'm sure, that 'tis no time at all to be playing with dreams and fancies."

Billy the Fool stood at the forge door as she passed—Billy, with the air of great business and importance which had come to him since David left him in sole charge of the smithy.

"Morning, Miss Good Intent!" he said, saluting gravely. "Terrible days for pleasuring, now that David's left me master-smith." He nodded towards the inside of the smithy, and a tranquil grin broke across his face. "Dan Foster's lad is blowing bellows in yonder. Te-he! I just told him to get the fire all a-glowing an' a-crackling, and the life chap's doing of it! 'Tis wonderful how some folk do sweat while other-some go playing."

"Then what will you play at to-day?" asked Cilla, her smile made up of rue and rosemary.

"Well, there's two-score iron palings waiting to be hammered into shape, like, and Fool Billy reckons he'll make a start at yond same, he will. Never knew before what 'twas to have all this wonderful lot of play to get through; David will laugh when he comes back. He always did say I was a queerish terrible chap when I settled to my play."

Priscilla was apt to search deeper into life since the troubled days arrived. She looked now at Billy the Fool, and remembered the scene last April at time of rescuing the lambs; she recalled the struggle at the edge of the pool, and Widow Mathewson's tale of what had happened long ago at Marshland's; she sought in Billy's face, as older folk had done, for some answer to the riddle of his character. She found none. Unhurried, skilled at his work so long as

a comrade named it play, his brown, trusting eyes looked into hers, and, if they held a secret, kept it well.

He looked again to see if Dan Foster's lad were plying the bellows within doors; then, by force of habit, he drew out a blackened pipe, and as quietly replaced it.

"There now!" he chuckled. "What with all this play about, I forget my manners. Fancied ye had a fill o' baccy on ye. Te-he, but Billy's a fool!"

"Not so big in that way as he looks," came a voice that went roaming down Garth street like pleasant thunder. "What! you're keeping Billy from his play-time? Shame on ye, Cilla."

"Nay, she's not keeping me," said Billy, taking Hirst's open pouch. "Dan Foster's lad is doing all the work these days, ye understand, and 'twould make your sides split to see him working yond old bellows up and down."

"We're not all as lucky as you," said the yeoman, passing a match to Billy. "Most of us have no play—and, by that token, I'm bringing a horse to be shod to-morrow."

The natural lit his pipe. He lit it as if the length of his days promised to be old as the fells that hemmed Garth in; and he drew quiet puffs before he answered. "Well now, Mr. Hirst, I'm right set on shoeing a horse to-morrow. After I've done wi' yond iron palings, and after I've slept for a night in greenfields bed, as a body might say, I'll be ready for you. 'Tis rare fun shoeing a lile horse, with a daft lad doing all the bellows-work for ye."

Hirst passed on with a cheery laugh, and linked his arm in Cilla's as they went up to Good Intent.

"Billy is like good pasture-land," he said, with a backward glance at the forge. "Soft on the crust, and firm underneath. Oh, ay! David did well to leave Fool Billy in his place."

But Cilla did not answer; her thoughts were half with David, who had left Garth when she needed him, and half with Reuben Gaunt, who hoped to keep a promise made to her.

Reuben himself drove to Shepston, and tried to get rid of the wish that Cilla had not crossed his path to-day—Cilla, whose gift in life was to make folk see glamour in unexpected corners.

Shepston was busy when he reached the town. He stabled his horse at the Norton Cross Tavern, and walked down the High Street in search of the mare he meant to get for Peggy. Half down the street he heard himself hailed by name, and turned. He saw Mother Lambert's weather-beaten face, smiling at him from behind her stall as she had smiled on Linsall Green.

"Morning," said Gaunt, with the heedless nod of old acquaintance.

He was passing on, but she checked him. "I saw ye last at Linsall, Mr. Gaunt. D'ye mind the pedlar there?"

"Why, yes." He was impatient, and anxious to get forward. "I bought a fairing from him; and his cheeks, I fancied, were more fiery with drink than usual."

Mother Lambert looked gravely at him across the trumpery wares that covered her stall.

"Best speak no ill o' the quiet folk, sir. The pedlar's dead—dead o' the fever three days ago. It was the fever that mottled his face; an' he said to me, as he stood on the green after ye'd bought your fairing for Peggy o' Mathewson's—he owned, he did, that he didn't feel hisseln, like, though he meant to plod on and be merry."

Gaunt's face was white. He had no thought of Cilla now, but remembered only the lass who had watched him win a race, the lass who had been tender to his failings and buoyant in her love for him.

"Are you speaking truth?" he asked.

"Well, yes. I mostly do, save when I've wares to sell—and business, Mr. Gaunt, is another basket of eggs, as the saying goes."

"I've laughed at the fever-dread till now," he said, after a troubled silence. "I take chances of that sort as they come; but 'tis different when there's a doubt that

Peggy may have caught it. Surely you've to come closer to it, and stay longer with it, than we did that day at Linsall?"

"What, for harm to come on 't? Nay! I've seen plenty o' fever i' my time, and I tell ye that kerchief ye bought for Peggy o' Mathewson's was enough in itself to give it to her. Poor Peggy! They always said—those that were jealous—that her liking for bright colours would bring her to grief one day."

Mother Lambert nodded sagely after Gaunt had left her. She had lived a hard, roving life, had long since learned to look at her neighbours with eyes unclouded by too much feeling; and she told herself now, with a quiet, impersonal wonder, that there was a real change in the man.

"Did ye see Reuben Gaunt go down street just now?" she asked a crony who came from a neighbouring stall for gossip.

"Ay. Straight set-up, as usual, and a neat lile figure to catch a lass's fancy. There's never much change in Gaunt."

"Well, there is a change, and that's the odd part of it. He's learned to think for another first, instead of himself, and that means a deal. Eh, but men are bothersome cattle! Ye think ye know 'em, right to the back o' their minds, and all of a sudden they turn just contrary-like."

Gaunt bought the mare for Peggy, and gave orders that it should be sent that day to Marshlands; but he had little heart either in the bargaining or the purchase. As he walked up the High Street toward the inn again, a hearse was moving slowly to the churchyard, which fronted and looked down upon the road. They told him that only one day of the last fifteen had passed without a burial, and some days there had been three or four. It was brought home to him at last that black fever was no boggart invented by mothers to frighten wayward bairns; he saw the scourge now as it really was, as a pestilence unlike all others, save the plague which many hundred years ago, folk said, had destroyed

whole villages and had made thriving townships into wasted hamlets.

Indeed, the fever, in a less degree, had that power to weaken men by terror which the plague had had long since. It was market-day, and a busy day along the High Street; but uneasiness and gloom showed plainly on all but the most reckless faces, and farmer-men, ashamed of a weakness they could not control, would glance at farmer-men, seeking for the tell-tale patches of mulberry-red which spelled infection.

Gaunt opened his lungs to the breeze when he was clear of Shepston. He knew that there was danger to himself, but had dismissed the thought; his cowardice was all for Peggy. He was glad to be out among clean fields again, with the open road in front of him and none to talk of the fever.

He walked straight up to Ghyll Farm after reaching home, and Peggy was standing at the gate of the croft, looking down the moor. She half looked for him, and for that reason had fastened the crimson kerchief round her throat; she had tied and untied it before her cracked mirror, with the honest coquetry which a woman finds when she knows that one man only has a claim to it.

Reuben saw the scarf, as soon almost as he caught sight of the waiting figure. The sunlight, stark and dry as the fields it had scorched, caught the warm colour of the kerchief.

"You look tired, Reuben," said Peggy o' Mathewson's, after a quiet glance at his face.

"Well, yes," he answered carelessly. "It was a hot drive into Shepston, and the fools would talk of nothing but their fever. I begin to think they're proud of it, Peggy."

"They've got used to it, you see," said the girl, with something of her mother's tart knowledge of the world. "'Tis queer, Reuben, how soon ye get used to a thing, even if 'tis bad, and seem to miss it when it goes."

He scarcely heard her. His eyes were fixed on the crimson scarf, and she smiled happily as she followed his glance.

"Yes, I'm wearing your gift, lad. Mother chided me just now—said 'twas no sort of fancy-stuff to wear when there were cattle needed milking by-and-by. I said ye'd given it me at Linsall Fair, and the lile, soft beasts would milk none the worse because I wore it."

Gaunt, though he did not know it, had caught something of the panic that troubled all the folk of Shepston. "At the back of his mind," as he put it to himself, he was sure that Peggy would catch no harm from the scarf at this late day; the harm was done already, or not done; yet he could not rest so long as she was wearing it.

"Peggy," he said, "I want that kerchief you're wearing."

Peggy o' Mathewson's laughed, though her eyes were full of disquiet. "Best buy another, Reuben, if you're fooling me again. I'll not let this one go to some lile fool who's turned her blue eyes on ye and made geese seem swans."

So then he told her—the sun lay merciless, low down to Windover Orag by this time—that Pedlar Joe had the fever on him when he sold the kerchief; and again she laughed.

"Is that all, Reuben? I thought 'twas worse." She looked down the moor, and into his face again; and her voice was soft with trouble. "Reuben, 'tis ill when ye doubt the man ye care for. I never cared, save for you—"

Gaunt forgot the scarf, forgot the sickness, and the hearse, and the great distrust, that had peopled the High Street at Shepston.

"Well," he asked, "what is amiss, then, if we're both of the same mind? Peggy, I've been fearing for you all the way home from market. I ought to take shame that a parcel of Shepston folk can scare me."

Down below, in Garth, Billy the Fool had done with his day's play at the forge, and had wandered out into what he named his greenfields bed. He made up the pastures and out into the open moor; and here, in a little hollow deep with heather, he lay down, turned twice or thrice till he had made a lair for himself, and breathed a sigh of sheer content.

"'Tis a right queer matter to be born daft-witted," he said to himself. "There's folk sleeping in Garth yonder at this minute 'twixt four hot walls, and no breath of air to help them. Only Fool Billy knows, 'twould seem, what a terrible cool bed a body can find right up at the top o' the world."

He lay there on his back and watched the stars, the waning moon whose colour was ivory tinged with saffron, the quiet blue of the sky. The wise folk spoke of the moor as a lonely place, where none could sleep without fear of the ghosts that were known to haunt it. To Fool Billy it was home. If grouse were lying near him in the heather, they were friends; if the old dog-fox from Sharprie Wood chose this track for purposes connected with his larder, Billy was acquainted with him; as for ghosts, there was only one that troubled him, and this had no dwelling among the marshes and the ling.

For an hour or more he lay, seeing God knew what of beauty and romance in the sky above him, hearing the least fret of life about the moor, and knowing well what each sound meant. Perhaps he heard other noises—low hum of the goblins as they worked for gold underground—light music of the fairies as they danced a measure in the hollow which served him as a bed. The daft-witted have privileges denied to those who in their wisdom sleep between stone walls.

Then he stirred uneasily. The one ghost that had power to trouble him stepped up the moor and lay beside him, hindering his outlook on a rarer world. It was the ghost of a memory—memory of a far-off night, bleak and

gusty, when some one had knocked at the door of Marshlands, and had been turned out again into the wind and rain—memory of a woman's sobs, a man's harsh, upbraiding voice, and then a silence and a sense of bitter cold. It was all that Billy remembered of his mother's death, his own suffering. The picture itself was clear enough, but round it were grey mists that hid what went before and what followed after. The only shape that showed clear to him out of the mists, at these times of trouble, was Reuben Gaunt's trim, well-built figure. By some tangled by-path his fancy blamed Reuben, not Reuben's father, for that evil night at Marshlands.

Billy the Fool sat up on his couch of heather. His face had the look that it had worn when, on Gaunt's first return to Garth, he had thrown him over the roadway wall into a clump of nettles—when, months since in the time of April snow, he had longed to throw his enemy into the drinking pool.

"They say black fever's come nigh or thereabouts to Garth," he said, talking to the silence as to a well-tried comrade. "Well, now, the fever wouldn't think of stopping at Fool Billy's snug house right up on the world's top. It might happen, though, that it took Gaunt o' Marshlands on the way."

He was pleased with the conceit, and presently a kindly mist covered all the picture of wrong-doing. Like a child who was ready for sleep, Fool Billy blinked at the stars and the waning moon. His friend, the dog-fox, passed that way and yapped a friendly greeting, and Billy answered. Then he looked up at the stars again, and a peace beyond wise men's understanding closed his eyelids. He slept as children do, and the smell of the heather was in his nostrils like a benediction.

CHAPTER XVIII

GAUNT COMES TO GHYLL

PEGGY's high spirits did not forsake her as the time for her wedding drew near; while Gaunt was eager, with a dash of haste and recklessness about the matter that appealed to her gypsy's temper.

She knew that poor fools down in the valley were sick with the heat and the fever-dread; for herself, she lived on the cooler moor, and a glance at its clean acres, a touch of its heather-wind, were enough to banish all thought of fever like an unclean ghost that had no place here on the hill-tops. She did not know that a part at least of Gaunt's haste was due to Priscilla of the Good Intent. Since the day when Cilla had met him on the Shepston road Reuben had found the old disquiet return. Like his father before him, he had an instinct for a wife who was comely of speech and manner; he needed, as Mrs. Mathewson had said bitterly in time of April snow, "a ladyish mistress for Marshlands." Do as he would these days, Gaunt saw constantly the picture of Cilla in her lilac frock. She would fit the old house as the well-ordered ivy did which grew along its front. Her voice would sound cool and low under the dark rafter-beams. There would be flowers about the house again, and the spinet would be stirred to life under Cilla's fingers.

Reuben was tormented by that picture, and each detail of it grew clearer as the days went on. The man was to be pitied, maybe, for he had the gift of fancy, and at times it bred in him a strange irresolution. The one instinct

in him longed for an orderly home, a settled purpose in life; the other took him to the open lands, where such as Peggy Mathewson, and the pedlar-folk, and the poachers, lived free of all convention. Each attracted him, and he had not once been taught, during his heedless and ungoverned boyhood, that it was idle to pursue two whims at once.

Peggy, keen-sighted as she was, had no inkling of Gaunt's weakness. He was eager, lover-like, full of plans for doing this and that about the house to make it ready for her. Even Widow Mathewson, though she looked for it, saw no hesitancy, no sign of withdrawal as the weeks drew on; and, in her own wry fashion, she was proud of Reuben, as a mother is proud of a weakling son when he shows glimpses of true manhood. It was little satisfaction to her, or none at all, that Peggy would be mistress of the biggest farm in Garth, would be wife to one of a yeoman breed so old that the Gaunts were counted as a sort of gentry among their farm-neighbours. The widow had her own pride of station, and not for a moment would she admit that her lass "was bettering herself" by marriage; she was simply glad that the girl, if she must needs set her heart on Reuben, was likely to be treated well.

For Peggy there was no shadow lying over these weeks. She had prayed, in her haphazard way, that there should be no break following that glamourous day at Linsall Fair; and her prayer was granted. It seemed strange to her that she had ever found hard words for Reuben. He was strong and tender and considerate; he asked only for a speedy wedding, and Peggy chided her mother because the widow was obstinate in her resolve.

"Nay, lass," Mrs. Mathewson would say. "Ye've bided long for Reuben, and 'tis a lile biding-time enough I've set him, surely. There's no daughter o' mine going to come pretty-come-quick to his call, just at the minute he cares to whistle."

And Peggy would laugh, and tell herself that she

was in no great haste for wedlock, after all. She asked for nothing beyond the present happiness. Strong at the churn, clear of vision, quick to see shortcomings in her neighbours, Peggy o' Mathewson's had yielded altogether to her love for Gaunt. He had put cobwebs over her eyes, as the Garth folk said ; for she heard the fairies sing when at nights she went up to the beck that trickled under the rowans, and looked down at the lights of Marshlands, and pictured Reuben there.

Towards the end of the waiting-time Gaunt rode up to Ghyll, and told them that he had to be away in the Midlands for a week. His father, in one of the buying fits that came on him at times, had bought property down there many a year ago, and Reuben had to look to it.

"'Twill be a wedding-gift for you, Peggy," he said at parting.

"My lad, I want no wedding-gifts. If ye must go, ye must go, an' good luck to ye ; but, Reuben, never talk o' gifts. The red kerchief you bought me at the Fair was enough for me—that, and what ye whispered on the home-way walk."

They were standing at the moor's edge, and peace was stealing up from the hollows. After the sun's heat and the weariness, the dusk laid gentle fingers on the land, as if some moorland doctor came to the bedside of an ailing child and, just by the touch of his hand on the parched forehead, brought healing and content.

There was no limit to the heath, seen by this magical, soft light. Sharprise Hill, crimson and gold and purple where the last of the sunset caught his crest, seemed to bound it on one side ; but Peggy, looking out with practised eyes, could see further hills, and hills beyond, each putting on its nightcap of saffron haze. Light scents, stifled by the sun, began to creep abroad. It was a gloaming such as few could see without a quickened sense of the bigness overlying all frets and worries of the long day's business.

For Peggy o' Mathewson's it was home. These darkening hollows—the rough, winding ridges reaching out to the spaces where, in some heathen way of worship, she always sought her God—the cool, faint smell of the bracken and the ling—were all that spelled life and freedom for Peggy. The gloaming's quiet, Gaunt's nearness, softened her reckless spirits, but could not check her laughter.

"Oh, Reuben, I am daft!" she said, putting both hands into his. "I fancied I could hold my own—and now I'm thinking only o' ye—will ye come back, or will ye not?—and are ye true, or are ye not?—and all such moonshine nonsense. Reuben, I've been happy these last days. You wouldn't spoil it all?"

"Not lightly," said Reuben, as he kissed her good-bye and went down the moor.

The next day Peggy was listless and out of heart. She fancied the heat ailed her, though until now she had been careless of all extremes of weather. Widow Mathewson noticed the change as she smoked her pipe by the hearth that night.

"Lile lass," she said, "ye're fretting for Reuben."

Peggy shivered and crept nearer the peat fire. "Oh, I'm thinking all o' ghosts, mother. He has to be away, and I'm daft to be needing him so, and there's many a mile 'twixt this and his home-coming."

The widow smiled, but her face was full of compassion. "I loved your father i' that way, Peggy. He was never much to lean on, but I missed him sorely when he went down kirkyard lane."

"You're sneering at Reuben again, mother." The girl's temper was frayed to-day.

"Nay, nay. I begin to think Reuben's stancher than your father ever was. Happen ye've come to your own, Peggy; and you'll shape him by-and-by. Oh, ay, you'll shape him. Men are all like an ill-hewn bit o' rock—needing the chisel."

Peggy o' Mathewson's crept nearer still to the peats.

The light of the one lamp shone on the pewter and the delft-ware that was Ghyll's special pride, and the fire-glow played bo-peep in the corners of the living-room.

"I scarce feel like a bride, mother," said Peggy, after a long silence.

"Tuts ! " answered Widow Mathewson. " Few maidens do. Ye talk as if there were no modesty left i' the world."

"I'm so cold. All day it has been like a goose walking ower my grave—just as I said to Reuben when we walked fro' Linsall Fair."

The widow was easy in her mind to-night. Her hidden liking for Gaunt need not be checked so much in future. She knew how bitterly she would miss Peggy in and about the house ; but she knew, too, that it was idle—or worse—to keep her lass from a home of her own. A glance at the girl's face, white and pinched, might have startled Widow Mathewson ; but she smoked her pipe, and looked into the grate, and hugged her self-content as a luxury seldom found at Ghyll.

"Fiddle-me-ree," she answered, with pleasant tartness. "The only geese that are walking abroad, to my knowledge, are ye an' Reuben—and he's a gander. Oh, lass Peggy, I've it all by heart ! Never sich a one i' the world as your man ; and ye know his shortcomings, plain as your own face in a pool ; and ye throw bits o' pebbles into the pool, just to stir his proper likeness into pleasanter shape ; and ye call it loving the lad. Lord o' mercy, there's been many a woman at yond pool-edge afore your time, and will be after. I was there myself once. 'Tis only nature."

Peggy got up, and went out through the porch, and stood looking out and away across the moor.

"I was there myself once," repeated Widow Mathewson, with a tolerant smile. "I must not forget what 'twas like—just the wee, lile fairies dancing, and witchcraft ower the moor."

She knocked her pipe out on the grate, and youth touched her brown, scarred face for a moment.

"Good sakes," she murmured, "I'd like to be young again like that—cobwebs about my eyes or no. Better be a blithesome fool at two-an'-twenty than a wiser one at sixty."

Five days later Gaunt returned to Garth. He came by the morning mail-coach, and sat by Will the Driver's side, and asked as many questions regarding the health of Garth folk as if he had been absent for a year.

"Oh, they've 'scaped fever right enough," said Will, trying to answer all his questions at once. "They're a bit scared still, but forgetting all such rubbish. Widow Lister's hale and hearty—ay, just a shade too hale and hearty. Billy the Fool is playing at the forge, and doing as much real work as ever David did, and won't take a penny for it. Has made a box, he, and tells all folk to put their silly money in through the slit and let it bide there till David comes again. Says he has no use for money—lile, wise lad as he is."

"And Widow Mathewson?" asked Gaunt.

Driver Will knew well enough what news the other was seeking; it was common knowledge now that Peggy o' Mathewson's and Gaunt had been "asked" three times at church. For that reason Dick concealed his knowledge as if it were a crime, and affected a fine ignorance as he flicked his team with the whip.

"Oh, she's well enough, or was a few days since. Have not seen Peggy or the widow since Monday last. Terrible home-bird folk, both on 'em. I liken 'em always in my mind to a brace o' nesting grouse, so shy and fierce and prideful as they are."

Gaunt asked for no more news until the coach rounded the curve that brought him within two miles of Garth.

"And Miss Priscilla?"

The driver gave him a shrewd, hasty glance. "Oh, well enough. She never alters—breath o' rosemary along the dusty road. Wish I'd been born a lile thought higher i' station, and could cast my eyes that way. There were

never two made like Miss Good Intent.—And there she is, by that token, walking just ahead.”

“You can put me down,” said Gaunt.

Driver Will wasted little time in stopping and in starting off again. He greeted Priscilla with a friendly, courteous salute when a moment later he passed her on the road; and then he touched his horses' ears with a gentle whip that spoke of deep reflection on his part. Will had leisure for reflection during those long drives between Shepston and the remote hamlet that ended his twenty-mile journey, and it was second nature to him now to piece together the life-stories of those who dwelt along the road. He knew the men and women, as a farmer knows each sheep in his flock; he had gathered as much knowledge of their failings and their virtues, indeed, as might have been dangerous in one less generous, less free of outlook, than Will the Driver.

“It must feel odd to be one o' Mr. Gaunt's sort,” he was thinking. “I mind yond day i' spring when they drove out with me, fond as kiss-me-quicks, to Keta's Well. I mind the way they came home again—she with the clover-pink in her cheeks, and Gaunt with a queer look in his eyes I'd not seen there before.—Get along, Captain, or they'll take ye for a tramp. Gee-up!—And now he's come home to wed Peggy o' Mathewson's; and I fancied, when he was seeking news just now, it was Peggy he was asking after, till—well, till he named Miss Good Intent. Eh, well,—get along, Captain! The Queen doesn't wait for her mails while such as ye snatch a sleep along the road.”

Gaunt had overtaken Cilla long ago, and she had turned to meet his greeting with the clover-pink in her cheeks that Dick the Driver had thought of.

“Will you come to my wedding?” he asked, ill at ease after his journey south and all the brave thoughts that had kept him company on the northward road.

Priscilla laughed. It was the Garth way when trouble must be met.

"You have asked me, Reuben—and father, too—of course we shall be at kirk."

They walked side by side in silence until the grey gable of Good Intent showed near at hand. Reuben could not take his eyes from the girl's face, and presently she looked up, embarrassed by a feeling of shame and unrest for which she could find no reason.

"I wish you both well," she said, halting at the gate.

The voice was not Cilla's; it was hesitating, cold. A random impulse took Gaunt unawares.

"Cilla——" he began eagerly.

She withdrew, and her coldness disappeared. She was self-reliant again, full of a dainty, half-mocking rebuke that would not stoop to anger.

"Good-bye," she said. "They call you running water, Reuben; but I've better hopes of you."

Reuben stayed a moment, watching her until the house-porch hid her. For once he was troubled by the knowledge of his own weakness. An hour ago he had been full of his wedding-plans, full of his early scamper out to Garth by the mail. Peggy did not expect him until late afternoon, and he had looked forward, with a boy's zest, to the surprise of a morning visit to Ghyll. It was Thursday, and Peggy would be busy at the churn; he would help her at the work. Widow Mathewson would have her jibe, half tart, half friendly, when she put her head round the door of the dairy and found him "doing real work for once in a long journey." That was the picture he had seen—until he overtook Priscilla on the road.

Gaunt set his face toward the moor, and made his way up to Ghyll; but the brightness of the picture had gone. He blamed himself for that moment's treason with Cilla; it seemed an ill beginning for his wedding. The day was hot and garish, too, and the fierce summer had set its mark more plainly on the pastures and the hedgerows. Such leaves as were left unshrivelled showed lifeless, drab; and never a bird sang. Thirst was walking like a spectre

through the land, side by side with the sun-heat. The fields, entreating rain, were gaping wide. Even the yarrow flowers, liking a lean and scanty soil, carried drooping heads. The sheep stood staring up into the sky; for they were tired of cropping grass that had no life or flavour in it.

When he reached the moor, Gaunt looked for Ghyll Farm. Its roof was set in the middle of waving lines of heat-haze, and no life stirred about the house. Fancy had played Reuben many a surly trick, but it helped him now to brace himself for coming trouble. Dalliance in sheltered Garth was forgotten; he felt that ill-news awaited him, and went forward, preparing himself to meet it. With all his faults, Gaunt was apt to meet an open danger in the face.

Mrs. Mathewson, from the window of Peggy's bedroom, had seen him come up the moor, and ran down and out into the croft. She found him opening the gate.

"Don't come nigh, Reuben," she cried. "I tell ye, don't come nigh!"

Her strong, lean arms were stretched towards him, motioning him away; there was trouble in her face, and her eyes had the look which tired folk wear when they have been awake throughout the night.

He thought at first that her old distrust of him had returned, and laughed.

"I'm not to be kept away from Ghyll these days, mother. Peggy is pledged to marry me next week, and 'tis over-late for you to say no to that."

As he came nearer Widow Mathewson withdrew. Gaunt could make nothing of the look she gave him—tragical, and full of pity, and weary beyond all belief.

"Ye'll not come in," she said sharply.

"And why shouldn't I?"

"Oh, Reuben—Reuben, the fever's come to Ghyll. Peggy lies yonder i' bed, and her face is ill to look at. Ye'll catch it, too, if ye come nigh the house—for me 'tis no matter—I'm over-old to care."

Gaunt paused for a moment, shocked by the news. Then he crossed the garden-strip and stood beside her in the porch.

"Mother," he said quietly, "it seems we've to know one another better. D'ye think I'm feared o' the fever—if Peggy has caught it?"

She stood away from him. In the hour of fear she could not rid herself of this habit of denying all courage in a man.

"Fever means little to me," she said drily. "I'm over and done with, Reuben, and care never at all whether I lig me down or no. But ye're young, lad——"

"And a coward?" broke in Reuben.

She glanced again at his face. "Well, no," she said. "I was wrong there, and I own it. But, Reuben—there's only one in three lives on to tell of it if they catch the fever."

"Then Peggy must be the one—that's all, mother. We'll save her yet between us."

He had no thought of himself. His face, after he had heard her news, was softened, yet full of quiet strength. The widow felt a grudging admiration for this man with whom she had fought so bitterly in days gone by; she looked again at his trim, healthy body, at the young strength in his face, and she was filled with pity.

"Reuben, lad, go back ower the moor," she said, peremptorily. "If one's to die, there's lile use killing two. I tell ye"—she broke off with a touch of the old bitterness—"the fever takes no more count of Mr. Gaunt o' Marshlands than it does o' plain Peggy Mathewson. 'Tis not just a risk ye're taking—'tis as near certain as aught i' this life can be that ye'll catch it, and die of it, and then there'll be no Gaunt at Marshlands."

"Well, there's not much to boast of, as it is—at Marshlands. If you put it that way, I'm risking little."

Widow Mathewson, though she and Peggy had lived high up above the peopled villages, had a sure instinct for

truth or meanness in her fellows. She could detect no sign of cowardice under Gaunt's quiet acceptance of his destiny. There was no bluster, covering a weak purpose. He meant to share Peggy's trouble.

"Reuben, there's few in Garth would be so daft," she said, still guarding the porch. "Think awhile! I've known what the fever means longer than you can know it. Thir' year back it came to Garth, and good men of their hands—good men of their lives, too, and honest—dared not come nigh a house that had the white cross on it."

"My father used to tell of it." Reuben was indifferent, as if it were no time to listen to bygone tales. He was thinking of Peggy, lying helpless in the upstairs room, and of his many treasons.

"Did he tell ye that the coffiners were found missing, from end to end of Garth, when they were needed to see bodies buried decently? Did he tell ye that men who'd faced storm on the moor, and danger o' most sorts, sat shivering by their fires, and dur'n't stir a finger to help stricken folk? Oh, Reuben, lad, 'tis no game o' kiss-by-the-stream, this, and so I tell you."

"Never said it was, mother," said Gaunt, drily. "I'm here to see we do our best for Peggy."

The widow understood, somehow, that Reuben the despised was her master in this time of stress. Weak as running water he might be afterwards, when better days arrived; but now he had the strength of many a likelier man. Her husband had been weak in all days, fair or foul, and memory of him had hindered her outlook upon Gaunt.

She stood in silence for awhile, her spare height framed against the entry to this house of sickness. Far down the reaches of the moor a tired haze lay, and asked for rain; from the blue of the weary sky the sun shone fiercely. Again the mother-pity came to Widow Mai' wson. For herself, it did not matter; she could tend Peggy, and could die if her time had come, and no tears wasted; but Gaunt

had no need to die just yet. She guarded the grey old porch as men, in the lawless times, had fought for their wives and bairns at this same door.

"'Tis the waiting-time will trouble ye, Reuben," she said, in a matter-of-fact, quiet voice. "Men are cowards when the fever comes, for that reason. If they could know in a day whether they'd caught it or no, they'd never heed the danger. Women are used to waiting, and they're bolder at these times."

"I'm coming in, mother."

"Nay, think over it, lad! Think over it! There'll be six weeks o' waiting before ever you know whether ye've caught the fever. Six weeks, Reuben! Plenty o' men wouldn't wait as long for a maid that was bonnie and well."

Reuben took her by the arms, and made a way for himself. "There, mother, 'tis done now, I take it. Lucky I told them down at Marshlands that I might or might not be home to-day. They'll not sit up for me to-night, and to-morrow I must get a message down somehow."

Mrs. Mathewson and Gaunt stood facing each other in the living-room. If there had been enmity between them, they did not remember it; a grave silence lay between them, for each knew that death lay very near—not to Peggy only, but to themselves.

"There's still a chance to go back, Reuben," she said at last. "You may or may not have caught it by stepping into the house, and you need say naught to nobody; but if ye once go up into the chamber—and I see your eyes on the stair-door—there'll be no return for ye."

A troubled moaning sounded from the room above, and Gaunt laid a hand on the latch of the staircase door. "It would ease Peggy, maybe, if she knew I was near," he said obstinately.

"She won't know! She's too far gone, I tell ye! Reuben, my lad, have just a thought for yourself."

He glanced at her, with his odd look of gravity and

self-effacement, and went up the stair. The widow heard his step on the boards overhead, then a startled cry. She knew what the cry meant. The Peggy who had watched him win the fell-race, who had danced on Linsall Green, was not the lass who lay on the bed up there; for the fever laid ugly hands on its victims, and on their minds its hold was still more cruel. There were no wild outbursts of delirium, followed by intervals of sanity and hope; there was only the low, helpless muttering, the sluggish apathy, the denial of all power or will to find healing from any human ministry.

Widow Mathewson paced up and down the living-room with her man-like strides; and by-and-by she heard Reuben pacing, too, across the floor above. It was Gaunt's hour of bitterness, the first hour of his heedless life that had found him ready to be taught his lesson. If he had dealt ill with Peggy o' Mathewson's in times past, he was paying something of the penalty now. It was not so much the bodily change in her that shocked and terrified him; it was the knowledge, brought suddenly home to him, that she did not care whether he stood at the bedside or not—that likely she would never care again in this world. The incessant moaning maddened him; it seemed to tell of some anguish that was beyond reach of his help. He could not believe that Peggy herself felt nothing, knew nothing—that it was he, in full vigour of mind and body, who suffered for her just by looking on.

He came down the stone stairway at last, and the widow ceased her restless walk. She looked at his face. It was white and stern, but there was no trace of personal fear in it.

"It was as well I came," he said.

"As well you came?" she echoed. "You say that after—after going to yond upstairs room?"

"Yea, mother. You may be tough, but 'twould have driven you mad to live alone with what's in the house here. Mother, is there naught at all we can do to ease her!" he broke off.

"Ay, but not much. I'm skilled enough in nursing-work, so far as that goes. But the fever doesn't take much count of nursing."

For the first time she let weakness overcome her. Her tears were few, but full of passionate relief, and they were a tribute to the sense that, for once in her stormy life, she had a man about her in time of need.

Gaunt patted her gently on the shoulder. All the hidden liking between this oddly-assorted pair was patent to them both.

"That's better," he said. "Wish Peggy up yonder could cry like that. 'Twould do her a power of good."

Toward gloaming of that day, as Reuben stood at the window after one of his fruitless visits to the room above, he saw a lad come up the slope of the moor. He ran out across the croft, and shouted to the lad. Already he had learned the instinct of all who had seen the fever close—the instinct to cry, like a leper of old, that none must come too near.

The lad ceased whistling, and halted in surprise; for Reuben, though he did not know it, was waving his arms like one far gone in drink or madness.

"I was only stepping up for a sitting of eggs fro' the widow. Miss Good Intent telled me to come," he said, half blubbing. "'Twas promised, yond clutch of eggs, and Miss Priscilla wants her chickens reared i' good time for the winter."

Gaunt saw now that it was Dan Foster's lad, whose delight, like that of bigger men, was to run errands for Cilla when he was not blowing the bellows for Fool Billy at the forge.

"Bide where you are!" he called sharply. "I want you to go back to Marshlands, and tell them I shall not be home for weeks. Have you got that message into your head, Dan?"

"Ay," said the lad, recovering from his bewilderment.

"And then go on to Good Intent, and tell Miss Cilla

that for God's sake she's not to come or send to Ghyll here." Gaunt, with a backward thought of Peggy lying in the upstairs room, was ashamed of his eagerness that Oilla should be saved. "You'll not forget, Dan?"

"No," said the boy, his native curiosity conquering the last trace of fear. "No, I'll not forget, Mr. Gaunt; but what must I say to Miss Good Intent? She's set on getting that clutch of eggs, and she'll want to know why, she will."

Gaunt laughed harshly. "Why? Tell her that the fever's come to Ghyll."

Like a wounded rabbit the lad sought cover. To him the fever meant all that was terrible, mysterious; he had heard his elders talk of it these months past beside the hearth; he feared that, even at this distance and with the clean breath of the heath between himself and Ghyll, he might be overtaken by the pestilence. Gaunt watched him run far down the moor and turn the shoulder of a hillock, and then he went indoors again. Mrs. Mathewson was sitting by the hearth.

"I've sent word to Marshlands," he said, taking a seat in the settle-corner as if the widow and he were friends of longer standing. "They'll not look for me till I come home again; and they must manage the farm as best they can."

The widow lifted her head and looked at Gaunt with the keen glance, which until to-day he had found disconcerting. No anxiety, no brooding instinct of disaster could check the tongue of this woman who had seen life's soft illusions leave her one by one.

"Ye'll likely not reach home again, Reuben."

"Likely not," he answered, feeling for his pipe and filling it with careful fingers. "There's few would miss me, come to think of it, save you and Peggy."

"D'ye think I'd miss ye, Reuben Gaunt?" she snapped, with a tired effort to resist her new outlook on the man.

"Yes, you, mother. D'ye hear Peggy moaning up

above us? 'Twas time that I, or another, came to help ye bear it."

Widow Mathewson reached out for her black clay pipe, and took a bit of live peat from the fire and lit the half-filled bowl. "We might as well smoke in company, Reuben," she said.

They smoked quietly for awhile.

"Gaunt," asked the widow suddenly, "d'ye know what fear means, or what death means, or are ye a likelier lad than I fancied?"

"I know what death means, mother," said Reuben, as he moved from the settle-corner to stir the peat-fire into life. "I've learned to-day."

Again a silence fell between them. Then the widow lit her pipe afresh, and her voice was gentler than Gaunt had known it hitherto.

"You've fooled a good few women i' your time, Reuben; but I think you're not by way o' fooling now."

"No," said Gaunt; "I'm not by way of fooling now."

Outside, there was no breath of ease to hint that rain might come to-morrow, or the next day after. In the red of a stagnant sunset the day had ceased, and night brought only a sultry heat that taxed men's endurance to the breaking-point.

"Reuben," said Widow Mathewson, "I wish th' wind would ding the house-door down, if only to stifle yond moaning up aboon us. She's all I've got, and I can do naught at all."

"Bide and see, mother. All's not over yet. There, let me fill your pipe again for you, mother. 'Twill never do to let you go handling an empty bowl."

Their vigil had begun. Widow Mathewson stole quiet glances now and then at the other's face. She was wondering if the fever had been sent, after all, to make a man of Gaunt of Marahlands.

CHAPTER XIX

THE NEWS IN GARTH

DAN FOSTER'S lad lost no time in delivering Gaunt's message at Marshlands. Fright lent speed to his legs, and he was glad to pass on his terror to older folk, with a boy's faith that they would be able, in their wisdom, to relieve him of it.

He got little comfort, however, from Gaunt's housekeeper. Her face was scared as his own, and she half closed the door against him.

"'Tis just like a trick o' yond Mathewsons," she snapped—"keeping themselves to themselves, as they do with their heathenish pride. Contrairy folk, I allus did say; and now they've brought fever into Garth. Oh, ay, 'tis like 'em."

With that she closed the door outright on Dan Foster's lad, just as Reuben's father had done upon the stranger woman long ago. She and old Gaunt had suffered from terror of different kinds, but the result in action was the same.

The lad whimpered afresh, just as Billy the Fool had done in that same long ago as he found himself lonely in the cutting wind. Then he set off again for Good Intent. Miss Cilla would be there; and there was healing wherever Miss Cilla was.

He found her throwing corn to her pigeons.

"Where is the clutch of eggs, Dan?" she asked, looking at the empty basket on his arm.

A boy who has had one rebuff fears twenty afterwards, and Dan kept his distance.

"Please, miss, Mr. Gaunt wouldn't let me come nigh."

"Why, Dan?"

"I duran't tell."

Cilla came to the gate of the croft. "You're no coward, Dan. Never say 'daren't' again in my hearing."

"They've fever up at Ghyll," he said, and turned half about, as if expecting to be driven away.

Priscilla lost courage, as Dan Foster's lad had done, but her cowardice was for another. Personal fear she had none; and throughout the long reign of terror, when even her father had gone in dread of fever at times, Cilla had never yielded to panic. She had met the danger as she had faced the heart-sickness which Gaunt had caused her in the spring; for Cilla's slimness, the charm which all acknowledged, was made up of strength, not weakness.

"Tell me, Dan—tell me quickly—it is at Ghyll the fever is? It is not Mr. Gaunt who has it? That cannot be, for I saw him only a few hours since."

"Nay," the lad answered bluntly. "Mr. Gaunt, he hasn't got it yet, but he'll have it soon, I reckon. Seems he's helping up yonder at Ghyll. Said he wouldn't be home for weeks, he did, and bid me carry a message for him to Marshlands."

"Lord help us!" broke in Widow Lister's soft, kittenish voice. "I said 'twould come; and what's a poor widow-body to do if she catches it, and her living all by her lone, without chick or child to help her?"

The widow had a keen scent for disaster. She had seen Dan come down the road with a look of fright, had followed him, and now was standing close to Cilla's elbow. As of old, her first thought was for herself; that was why, as she stood in the sunlight, no line or wrinkle showed on her babyish face, though other women of her age would have earned such marks of righteousness long since.

Cilla turned, and her smile was quick and eager. She was glad just now for a respite from her thoughts. "Lord

help other folk, Mrs. Lister," she answered briskly. "Have you never tried that medicine?"

The widow sighed, and her eyes sought the ground meekly, "Oh! of a girl," she was thinking, "to go lecturing me. As if I didn't spend all my days i' worriting about other folk's troubles. I'm always the first to find troubles out. But then she doesn't know what the fever means, the lile, daft lass."

Dan had taken a look at the sun, his only timepiece, and had grown alert on the sudden.

"I'll be wishing you good-day, Miss Cilla," he said, touching his cap. "'Tis five o'clock, or thereabouts, and I promised Billy the Fool I'd bellows-blow for him. He gets terrible short i' the temper, does Billy, if I'm not there to a minute."

Widow Lister followed him down the road. "Oh, Dan, my lad!" she called after him. "Tell Billy he's never mended my bit of a window-fastener yet. David promised to do it, and went over-seas; then Billy said he'd do the job; but men are all of a pattern, and always were."

Cilla watched the two of them out of sight. Well as she knew the widow, there was something unexpected—ludicrous almost—in her remembrance of the window-fastener. The fever had come to Ghyll; it might steal down to Garth before the month was out; yet Widow Lister, in the midst of childish fright could remember that David the Smith had left one job undone when he set sail for Canada.

"What's amiss, lile lass?" asked her father, coming down the highway and seeing the troubled look in her face.

"Oh, nothing, father—the day has been over-warm, and I'm feeling it, maybe."

"Now, don't go blaming the weather," roared Yeoman Hirst, admitting all the parish into his confidence. "Weather comes, and it goes. There needs more than that to shake you, Cilla."

She told him the news, and Yeoman Hirst stood very

still for a moment. He was afraid, and he was conquering his fear.

"'Twas bound to reach us soon or late," he said, in a steady voice. "Fancied it might leave bonnie Garth alone, but 'twas not to be. We'll just have to look it straight i' the face, lass, and get on with our day's work as if naught had happened."

Cilla put an arm through her father's. There was something vastly clean, something strong and childlike, in the yeoman's faith; he was a man to lean upon, as Widow Mathewson would have put it.

"It's at Ghyll, you say?" went on the farmer after a pause. "Which of the two has caught it—the mother, or Peggy?"

"Dan didn't say. He was so scared, poor lad, that he seemed glad to be rid of his message and away. But Renben Gaunt is there, and means to bide."

Hirst's temper was ruffled by his fear and the need to check it, as a strong man's way is. "I can understand his being there—but as for biding, Gaunt was never one to stay two minutes in one place—specially if there happened to be danger to himself."

"You're wrong father." Cilla's voice was warm in defence of the man who had slighted her. "He may be this and that, but not a coward. If he'd found all well at Ghyll, he might have roamed abroad—as it was, he stayed."

"Oh, the snod ways o' reasoning ye women have!" growled Hirst. "Dan brought false news, if he said Gaunt stayed in a fever-house. I wouldn't do it myself, lass; and I should reckon myself a prudent man, I tell you, for taking to my heels. There, there! I never could bear to wrangle, least of all with you, Cilla. Come away in, and get my tea ready. I'm droughty and dry, like the roads these days."

At Ghyll, away on the heights, the hot day ended in weariness and trouble. Widow Mathewson had crept often

up the stair to see if she could help her lass ; and now she and Reuben were smoking together beside the hearth. If their courage needed proof, these two were finding it ; for they were winning it from fear. The fever was no fanciful scourge ; it came like a sword that did not kill with a clean blade at once, but hacked its victim with a blunt, rusty edge until the end came ; and strength or weakness of the folk who met it mattered little, as with other plagues.

The widow and Reuben Gaunt smoked tranquilly by the hearth ; and the quiet, hot silence lay between two folk who were learning to approve each other. The woman, after the moorland fashion, was passing the time with tales of the last visitation. It seemed to give her some relief, just as the sleepy fire of peats served, in some odd way, to cheer the sultriness which it intensified.

"You were in your cradle then," she said, "and knew naught of it, though it carried your mother off. Reuben, if ye ever want to know what flimsy stuff we're made of—high or low, good 'uns and bad—ye've got to look on at a fever-time. The fear seems more catching than the fever itself, and always the big, hearty men catch it worst. Oh, the sights that come back to mind ! Thirty-and-four year ago it was, and all comes back as plain as Peggy's moaning up above us yonder."

Gaunt saw that it eased her to talk of olden days. The man had grown gentle, considerate. He was full of this new experience of thinking for others rather than himself.

"Tell me about them, mother," he said.

"Oh, there's no use i' telling. You need to have seen it—as you will do, happen, if you're spared—to know the shame of fright. Every house was an island to itself. Men who'd faced bulls run mad at Shepston market-day, men who'd risked crossing the bogland at dark o' night to bring comfort to a friend—where were they, Reuben ? Hugging their own firesides. Not a drop o' milk could the poorer sort get—and milk was needed, ye'll be sure, i' the stricken cottages—for a watch was kept at th' farm-gate,

and they were fended off before they could bring their pitchers nigh."

The widow talked as of things she had seen long ago with clear, unfrightened eyes. She would pause to light her pipe, and then would drop into a friendly silence, taking up the tale again at leisure. For she knew that, however it went with Peggy, there would be time and to spare for talk with Reuben.

"I've seen young folk shiver and shake when small-pox was so much as named. Bless ye, I've seen worse than small-pox! It may spoil your face—and what day of a hard life doesn't help to spoil your looks?—but there's a chance of living on. There's the rub, lad! 'Tis when ye set folk face to face wi' what's all but certain death that ye know what they're made of. There's rum i' the cupboard, Reuben. I'm forgetting what manners I ever had."

"No, and thank you, mother—not just to-night."

The widow got up, set glasses and a bottle on the table, and took down the kettle from the reekan hanging over the peat-fire.

"Don't ye go too far i' godliness all at once, Reuben," she said, with a flash of her old tartness. "You're not going to save Peggy by keeping a drop of liquor out o' ye—but happen you'll let the fever in by playing the miser that way."

Gaunt had been right when he said that the widow could never have borne her loneliness without a man to help her. Already she was gentler than he had known her. She jested about the measure of rum she shared with him, saying that he led her into bad ways. She had found that interval of peace which sometimes comes to folk in the bitterest of their troubles; and those who have lived and suffered long say that it is God's breathing-space, granted to brave folk lest their courage should fail them at the pinch.

Down at Garth the stars lay tranquil over David's forge. Dan Foster's lad was sweating at the bellows, while Fool

Billy played at getting the day's work done; and Yeoman Hirst, seeing the fire-glow cross the road as he came by, stepped in to ask if his fencing-rails were ready for the morrow.

"Te-he!" chuckled Billy. "Said they'd be done right fair in time, I did, and Billy keeps his word. Ye'd have nigh split your sides, yeoman, to see Dan yonder a-blowing and a-blowing till I fancied he was going to burst his life self and the bellows too. You're stepping up to Good Intent? Well, now I'll stretch my legs a bit, I will, after all this playtime."

He walked in silence beside Hirst, after accepting his customary match and pipeful of tobacco. It was not till they reached Good Intent that the workings of the natural's mind showed plainly.

"Dan tells me fever's come to Ghyll," he said, in the low, dispassionate voice which was always a sign, to those who knew him, of some troubled reaching-out to his blurred past.

"Ay, but don't ye go fearing it, lad Billy. 'Twould never hurt such as ye."

"Was thinking of Mr. Gaunt. Dan says he's up yonder. Now, 'twould be terrible pranksome if he happened to die of it himself. There'd be such a clearing o' the air, as a body might say."

Hirst, little as he cared for Rauben Gaunt, was shocked by the quietness with which Billy uttered the wish. This lad, who was peaceable and kindly of face as Garth street itself, was asking a terrible punishment for his one enemy.

"Oh, tuts, lad!" said the yeoman, patting him roughly on the shoulder. "We don't pray fever on any man, surely, whether we like him or no."

"Well, now, I don't *pray* fever. Couldn't if I were minded to. I just think long o' what I want—as hard as my daft wits can be driven, yeoman—and then I bide till it comes."

Yeoman Hirst had no insight into the byways of

prayer; he said his own on Sabbaths, while Billy was roaming wide across the moors, and he said them with the simple faith that was a part of his dealings with this and with the next world. He was nonplussed, for the natural at these times was self-possessed, and his quiet statements, as of fact, unsettled wiser men.

"Come in, lad," said Hirst, pushing the other into the porchway. "I'll tell Oilla to draw ye a sup of home-brewed ale, and we'll talk o' likelier things than fever."

"Than! ye, but nay," said Fool Billy, after a pause. "I've a mind to shut down the forge, and then get home to bed among the heather. Terrible chap is Billy for playing all day, like. Then he needs his snug bed under sky-blankets, yeoman. I'll be bidding ye good-night, I. There's a lavrock calls me up with the dawn, and he'll miss me if I oversleep myself."

"Is it Billy that's the fool, Oilla, or me and you?" asked Hirst, coming into the living-room, and finding Priscilla tending the geraniums that lined the window-sill.

"You and me, father," answered Oilla, with a queer little laugh. "I was thinking of Reuben Gaunt when you came in, and that was foolishness, you've always told me."

Hirst settled himself in the hooded chair, and stirred the peat-fire into a warmth that was no way needed. "So was Fool Billy," he grumbled. "He wished the fever might take him up at Ghyll yonder."

Oilla had been thinking her own thoughts; and she came and stood by the hearth, one hand on the mantel, with its tea-canisters and its china dogs. Through the heat, and the work of the farm, and the fever-dread, Priscilla was still the bravest thing in Garth. She had something about her at all times of that starlight strength and constancy which Fool Billy courted as he slept among the heather-beds.

"I've wished better things for Reuben," she said. "I was thinking, when you stepped in, father, that he's done what few in Garth would do."

"Won a fell-race, eh? To be sure, there's some credit in doing that; but, Oilla, life's not made up of fell-races, and ye're daft to think o' Reuben."

"Oh, father, no! It was more than the race I was thinking of. From what Dan said, he is staying at Ghyll. You need have no doubt of that, as you had this morning. How many would have done as much—how many of all the folk we know? To run a race, father, and hear them clapping hands, and know your feet are going nimbly—that seems easy, and soon over, win or lose it. But to wait beside a fever-bed!"

Hirst stirred uneasily in his chair. "Now, Oilla, you're letting fancy play the dāngment wi' ye, same as Gaunt did always. Fancies are well enough, lass, but I'm for the day's work, with beef and ale to prop it up."

"Reuben is for the day's work," said Oilla, quietly—"a harder working day than I've had yet."

Hirst reached for his pipe, and sat in silence. Priscilla rested both hands lightly on the mantel, and stooped to the smouldering peats, and saw fire-pictures there. All her love for Gaunt had found resurrection. The shame that had followed the green, soft days of spring was forgotten. If he could prove himself the best of those who ran at Linsall Fair, if afterwards he could face the quietness of that dread which few met bravely, he had shown courage of two kinds. His faults—were they not all on the surface? He had found little chance as yet to show his strength.

It was so that Oilla went excusing him; and presently, as she looked deeper into the peats, she grew angry with herself for thinking that excuse of any kind was needed. She remembered Widow Mathewson's tale, her picture of Reuben's motherless, untended boyhood. Her heart went out to him; and suddenly she flushed with keen dismay. Under all other thoughts was the question whether it were Peggy, or Mrs. Mathewson, who had caught the fever. She had come near to making a dream-picture of what might follow if Gaunt were free—if Gaunt were free.

She checked herself. "Father, there's nothing so idle as thoughts," she said, standing straight to her comely height, and seeking wisdom from the other's bigness and look of well-being. "'Tis time I got to bed, if I'm to be ready for my work in the morning. Good-night, father."

He lingered on the last words, and Hirst, who was no fool so far as observation went, laughed quietly over his pipe when she had gone.

"She's tender with the old man," he muttered. "Bless me if the lile fool hasn't been thinking o' Gaunt again. I know that note in her voice. She had it i' spring, and it put me in mind of a blackbird's when she's all about building her nest. Well, I've known queer cattle i' my time, but the queerest of all is women. I like 'em, though, for all that."

He tried to banish Gaunt from his thoughts, as a man of no account, and he could not. Like Oilla, he was just; and he knew that Gaunt, if it were true that he had stayed by choice at Ghyll, was a better man to-day than he.

"Mind ye, I don't believe the tale," he said stubbornly, stirring the peats with needless vigour. "Dan Foster's lad is like others—light o' feet and light o' thought. He brought a wrong tale down to Garth; but we shall know, I reckon, by the morning."

Oilla, in her room above, was less anxious to get to bed betimes than she had seemed. She leaned at the open casement, and watched the half-moon ride the sky. Not a breath of air came from the steaming night; it was cooler within doors than without. The apple-tree, whose delicate spring green had curtained the windows, showed drooping leaves; its sickly fruit lay shrivelled, asking only for a breeze to come and snap the withered stalks. Even the hills, ranging out and out across the clearness of the night, suggested weariness instead of strength. It was weather to help no man's crops; but the fever throve on it.

Oilla had no thought of heat. She had returned to the cool days of spring, when Gaunt had made her feel the

beauty of this land which she had known from childhood. As yet she cared less for the man, maybe, than for the glamour he had brought her; and each proof that he was strong was proof, too, that the glamour had not lied to her.

Oilla had her own way of meeting the odds and ends of circumstance. She seemed always to be looking at some light ahead, as mariners do. When at last she got to bed, it was only to fall asleep and dream again of Keta's Well, and saunters by the stream-side, and softer golds and deeper crimsons that she had ever seen in the skies of Garth, until Reuben came to teach her what the homeland meant.

Once she stirred in her sleep. "David, dreams cannot last," she murmured. "You know they cannot. David, come home again to Garth."

Then afterwards her dreams were quiet; and she and Reuben were seated on the mail that slipped between young April hedgerows. She could hear Will the Driver, as he laughed and touched the leader with his whip.

"Gee-up, Captain!" Will was saying. "We're on the Queen's business, and we've lost time to make up."

CHAPTER XX

THE LONG WATCH

At ten of the next morning Widow Mathewson crept down the stairway at Ghyll Farm. Gaunt had snatched what sleep he could on the settle in the living-room.

"You're needed, Reuben," she said, touching him on the shoulder.

He was on his feet at once; and to the widow it was restful to find a man who answered so quickly to the call of need.

"Well?" he asked, rubbing his eyes.

"She's all but gone—I thought, like, ye might care——"

He went up the stair, and she followed him. Gaunt, in days past, had needed the whip across his back; he was finding it now. There was no lifting of Peggy's eyes to his, no word to bridge the passage. He took her hands in his, but they were dumb. There was a stifled breath, as of one who seeks for air in an overcrowded room, and that was all. Peggy o' Mathewson's had gone out along the black, hot fever-road.

The widow looked at Gaunt, and pushed him gently from the room. "Poor lad," was all she said. "'Tis one more trouble added to the peck for me—but ye're not used to it."

Gaunt went out through the porch, and across to the gate of the croft, and stood there leaning over the top bar, just as Peggy had done when she said good-bye to him. A great stillness lay over the lands; there was no movement of

bird, or sheep, or cattle; no breeze stirred, and the sun, stark in the everlasting blue, seemed the one unwearied thing in Nature.

A stillness lay, too, upon Reuben Gaunt. He was groping toward the future. A few days since Peggy had kissed him at the gate here, had bidden him return as quickly as he could. After that was silence. Though he had seen her, watched beside her bed, no word had passed between them. Not a sign of recognition had come to soften the blow. He could only recall the girl's vigour, her glowing health, and contrast them with what lay behind him at the farm.

Gradually the numbness left him, and the first, sharp sense of grief intruded. He dwelt unduly on the ugliness and horror of Peggy's death, as though they mattered now that the soul had passed. He thought in a vague, haphazard fashion, of many ways in which he might have dealt better with her. He had a senseless longing to take back that day at Linsall Fair, when he had tempted her to meet the fever. They might have chosen twenty other roads than that to Linsall. Mrs. Mathewson, with her creed that was old and pagan as the moor itself, would have told him that he was not to blame in this—that the road to Linsall Fair was planned out before ever Peggy lay in her cradle.

Gaunt had known pain of body, but this anguish that grew keener every moment was new to him. He had no knowledge of the way to meet it, and such ignorance makes all men cowardly.

He had lost all sense of time until a glance at the sun showed that it was lying over Dingle Nook. He had spent two hours here at the gate, it seemed. Again he blamed himself, and thought of Widow Mathewson, and went back to the farm.

She met him at the door. "'Twas kind o' ye, Reuben, to leave me to my work; but, then, you're always kind these days."

"I fancied I'd left you in the lurch, mother."

"Nay! There was summat to be done, and ye'd have been i' the way."

They looked at each other, the man who suffered and the woman who had suffered much. On their faces was that light, steady and full of wonder, which touches those who have just stood near to death.

"Have you been——?" he began, with quick intuition, and could not put his question into words.

"Ay, getting the poor lass ready." The widow's lips trembled. She reached out for Gaunt's hands impulsively. "I should have been readying her for her wedding instead, Reuben! Oh, my lad, 'tis a queer business, this o' living and dying—but 'specially the living."

Gaunt knew that he was needed, and answered the call. "There, mother, you're not left alone."

The words were few, but the tone of them gave new strength to Mrs. Mathewson. "Ye can call me mother often—never too often—it's only fro' your lips I shall ever hear the name again."

Throughout the watch these two had shared, no moment had been so full of unexpected tenderness. The widow was leaning on Reuben as on a trusted son, and he stood to her—not in promise, but in deed—as a stay-by in her latter years. The grip of his hands helped her to face what had to come; the steady ring of his voice relieved a solitude whose silence might otherwise have broken down her spirit.

"I must get word down to the coffiner at Garth," said Reuben, knowing how the thought of work to be done would steady Mrs. Mathewson. "I'll look for a farm-lad to pass up the fields, and shout to him."

"Nay, but ye won't! I've planned it all out i' my mind these last two hours. Nathan, the coffiner, wouldn't come within a mile o' Ghyll; I know Nathan, and he's frightened o' smaller things than fever. See ye, Reuben! She was always full o' fancies, and often she used to say to me, sitting beside the hearth o' nights, 'Mother,' she'd say, 'if ever I happen to die, I'd like to be buried clean i' the peat,

not down i' a wet churchyard.' She'd lived lonely, ye see, like myself, and I fancy she's no liking for many neighbours even i' th' kirkyard."

Reuben was ill at ease. He had made no pretence of godliness in years past, but at such a time as this old memories revived.

"Mother, you'd have the parson—you'll laugh at me, maybe—but surely you'd have the parson say a prayer above her?"

Widow Mathewson had always been fearless in her outlook, whether it were true or false, and she did not yield. "I don't laugh at ye, lad, but such softnesses were never meant for Peggy and me. 'Tis all very well i' the tamer lands—but not up here. She lived as she lived, and she died as she died, and naught alters that. God rest her soul, say I; but that's as she made her bed i' this life, Reuben," she went on, abandoning all her hardness again. "I've done a deal o' thinking about religion i' my time, and never come much nearer aught. Ye might tell me that Peggy did as weel i' this life as could be expected of a body? Now, there, I'm growing old, or I'd not give way to whimsies. Reach down my pipe for me, Reuben; 'baccy always helps me to get right-sides-up wi' the world again."

Gaunt, the ne'er-do-well, felt an odd thrill of comfort in ministering to this hard-featured woman who depended on him. He filled her pipe for her, and he lit a spill at the fire.

"That's better," she said, drawing long puffs of smoke. "There's a deal to be done, and there never was use i' blinking work. For myself, it matters naught either way; but for ye, Reuben—well, 'tis best to get fever out of a house as quick as may be. It wouldn't help a living soul if silly Nathan stepped up and caught the fever—or if parson came—and he's one o' the few i' Garth who would. Parson is staunch, for all he thinks me heathenish. Ye've faced a good deal, Reuben—surely ye'll help me to keep fever out o' Garth?"

Gaunt moved uneasily about the room. He would have

had another kind of burial, but there was no gainsaying the other's wisdom. The village, so far, had escaped contagion; his own feelings must stand aside, surely, when measured by the terrible price which Garth might have to pay for them.

"We have no right to do aught else," he said, turning to meet the widow's glance. "See, mother, she always had a liking for the spot where the rowan hangs over the stream. I've been thinking she might wish to be laid there."

The widow nodded. "Get to your work, Reuben," was all she said. "It doesn't do to sit idle at such-like times."

Something near to peace came to Gaunt when he reached the little ghyll and stood watching the stream, all but dry now, trickle down the rocky slope under the rowan. It seemed that, after all, Peggy would sleep more soundly in her own homeland here than in another place.

The peat lay soft and deep almost down to the edge of the streamway, and there was little trouble in the digging. With a touch of that fugitive poetry which was part of the man, he conquered his horror of the work. He told himself that she would like to have the stream-song close beside her, day and night. Death would not be a sleep and a forgetting, but a sleep that remembered all the pleasant moorland haunts. And the rowan leaves would shelter her from heat in summer; and in winter-time the peat would lie between Peggy and the wildest storms that blew.

Fancies crowded round Reuben as he worked in the pitiless heat. It was well that they came to his relief, for stancher men than he might have yielded without shame to the misery of the task.

He looked up at last and dashed the sweat from his eyes. The grave was ready. The heat-waves running from end to end of the open moor danced giddily before him; he felt the body sickness which had caught him at the end of the fell-race—the race which had ended with an over-moor walk home and a halt under the rowan here, while Peggy and he talked of their coming marriage.

When he recovered and could see the moor again in proper outline, he saw Billy the Fool standing on the spur of rising ground behind. Billy's face showed no trace of feeling; he stood motionless as some stone landmark reared to guide travellers across the heath.

"Digging a grave, Mr. Gaunt?" he said quietly.

Reuben was too deep in sorrow to be startled. He had not known there was a looker-on while he worked, and Billy was the last of all Garth folk he would have wished to see just now; but it mattered little.

"Yes, digging a grave, Billy." His voice was tired. "I would not come over-near if I were you, for there's fever come to Ghyll."

"Te-he!" answered Billy, gravely. "Fever doesn't take like fools such as me. 'Tis the sensible, wise folk—such as ye, Mr. Gaunt—that it takes a fancy to."

He was not afraid. So much was sure. But he turned and went down the moor with his easy, lopping strides; and Reuben wondered for a moment, in the midst of his weariness, what Billy the Fool was doing here.

Billy could have given him no answer. He had learned of the trouble at Ghyll, and instinct had brought him up the moor to learn if it were Gaunt who was likely to die. Instinct took him, now that he had seen Reuben alive and well, down to the forge where work awaited him.

Gaunt forgot that he had come. He went heavily across the strip of moor to Ghyll, leaving his spade at the graveside.

They were strong of body, Widow Mathewson and he, and it was only a little way from the farm to the rowan-tree. When all was done, and the kindly peat lay smooth above Gaunt's first dream of wedlock, a curlew came flapping down the moor, and paused above the rowan-tree, and wheeled about it in wide circles. Sometimes it drew nearer, and sometimes it roamed wide; but it did not leave them, and its wail was piteous.

The widow's face was drawn and lined, as Gaunt's was, but she held herself bravely, and her voice was quiet.

"Happen the curlew's her parson, Reuben. Would she be happier, think ye, down yonder i' Garth kirkyard?"

"'Tis strange, mother. I've heard few birds call since I came to Ghyll, and now——"

"Strange? There's naught stranger than life, Reuben—than life, and what we've put to bed under the rowan-tree. Folk get mazed wi' chatter, seems to me, down i' the valleys; they fancy life's made up o' gossip, and borrowing tin-kettles one from t' other, and quarrelling when one here and there has burned the bottom through."

The curlew drew nearer to them, wheeled above their head. Its cry was Ishmael's, and the under-note of it was loneliness.

"Yond's Peggy's mate," said the widow. "She was always a wild bird, she, and she never would have settled down at Marshlands. Reuben, lad, cannot ye comfort yourself wi' that thought?"

He smiled gravely. "Had I no wildness, then?" he asked. "That used to be your complaint of me in the old days."

"Ay, but 'twas a different sort o' wildness. See yond curlew. 'Twill go down to the lowlands to feed, Reuben, and to have a frolic, like—but tell it that it's got to bide there for life, and 'twould die o' home-sickness. Oh, it's hard to say it—and harder to believe it just yet—but maybe all's for the best."

She turned for a last look at the grave; then, with a firmer tread than Gaunt's, she moved down the moor. As they reached the croft they saw a burly horseman unfastening the gate with his crop.

"Nay, doctor, if ye please!" cried the widow, lifting a warning hand.

"Oh, I know you've fever in the house," he said impatiently. "That's why I came. I only heard of it an hour since, as I passed through Garth. How's the patient?"

"Past your caring for—but thank ye all the same, doctor."

"Oh, bless me—Peggy dead? I can't believe it. Mrs. Mathewson, I wish to God I'd heard the news sooner. I might have saved her."

"I fancy not. She never had the look o' one that was going to mend, and I've seen many a case i' my time. Now, doctor, turn about. There's the rest o' the dale to think of, and ye'll not better aught by seeking risks."

She told him of the burial, of Reuben's help, of their resolve to save Garth, so far as their own endurance went, from the scourge that lay so close about it. She spoke of these matters as of such usual tasks as cattle-milking or taking corn to the poultry-yard; there was no sense of heroism behind her quiet statement of the facts.

The doctor ceased fumbling with the rusty gate-catch. "I always thought you had sense enough for three, and now I know it. Of course, I should be a fool—a bit of a knave, too—to go in when there's nothing to be done."

Widow Mathewson could not restrain the pride—grim enough, but clean and honest—which had given her strength to meet the years of trouble. There was no malice in her tone, no unfriendliness.

"They always said i' Garth that we kept ourselves to ourselves up here. Well, we did while we were i' health, doctor—tell them we'll do no less, now we're in trouble."

The doctor nodded, gave a quick, inquiring glance at Reuben from under his shaggy eyebrows, and rode forward along the ridge of the moor.

"I must notify the death for them," he thought, as he jogged along. "They'll never think of the need for it, so I must. Well, I've not seen the lass, and it will be irregular, to be sure—but Lord knows they ask few questions when it's a fever case. Soonest hidden away out of sight, the better folk are pleased these days. And burial in peat," he added, with brisk commendation. "Very wise. Peat lets no fresh infection through the soil."

Then he fell to thinking of Reuben Gaunt. Mrs. Mathewson had made it plain that Reuben entered the farm

with knowledge of the danger, and that he chose to stay rather than leave her friendless. The doctor, during his years of rough intercourse with many people, had found less courage in the face of death than he cared to admit; he himself was as hardened against fear as he was against exposure and fatigue, and he grew impatient when weaker men showed signs of panic.

"He knew what it meant when he stepped into Ghyll," he muttered. "Well, well, I've been mistaken in Gaunt, it seems."

At the end of his long day's round he was riding slowly down the village—his stout nag as wearied with the heat as himself—when he met Cilla of the Good Intent, and reined up.

"You're the only cool thing I've seen to-day," he declared, with bluff gallantry. "Bless me, Cilla, how d'ye contrive it? I was never one to flatter, but you put me in mind of a spring flower peeping out of a hedgerow. It is not spring, child, and primroses are over for this year, and the heat, I tell you, is appalling."

He wagged his head fiercely, but Cilla only laughed; and the laugh was cool and dainty as her person. Then suddenly her face clouded.

"We ought not to be jesting, doctor. Indeed, we ought not. I cannot keep my thoughts away from those poor folk at Ghyll."

The doctor halted, irresolute for once. He knew more of the history of the countryside than even Will the Driver did, and now he remembered many rumours, earlier in the year, that Gaunt would carry off Priscilla after all the rest of Garth had failed. He had been sorry to hear the news then; but his feelings had changed since morning.

"Best tell you at once," he said, "for you're bound to hear it soon or late. Peggy o' Mathewson's died this morning."

He regretted his impulsiveness when he saw Cilla move unsteadily across the road, and rest her hand on his saddle

as if she could not stand without support. He should have let another break the news that Gaunt was free, so he told himself.

Oilla's pride was of a different texture from Widow Mathewson's, but it was as strong in its own way, and it did not fail her when need came. She was pale, and her eyes were over-bright, but she stood upright again and looked the doctor in the face.

"Tell me," she said, "did Mr. Gaunt go there—and did he stay in the house—of his own free will?"

"What else should have kept him, lassie? I had all the tale from Mrs. Mathewson, and I tell you she's lucky to have such a man about her. Pride may be fine enough, Oilla, but not when you're alone in a house, with one death to cry over and another—your own—to look forward to."

Oilla's face clouded again. "Is—is the risk so great as they would have us believe?"

"Well, maybe not—there's always hope—always hope, Oilla. And there are two of them to keep the boggarts away."

Yet Oilla knew that the old doctor took a grave view of the matter; his praise of Gaunt, praise such as he rarely gave, was proof that he thought Reuben guilty of foolhardiness. All Garth would learn now that its judgment of Gaunt had been wrong; but there would be little use in that, if he died in proving it.

Then suddenly she thought of Peggy, and pity drove away her selfishness. She recalled the fine, careless swing of the gypsy figure as "Mathewson's lass" had passed her on the moors or going to market. There seemed something harsh, uncalled for, in the passing of so brave a soul. And it was she who had persuaded Reuben, in those near, yet far-off days of spring, to be true to Peggy Mathewson.

Priscilla returned tired-out to Good Intent. The world of Garth might be small, but the girl's heart was big as the limits of human compassion and human searching after happiness. The two instincts were so mingled, since hearing the doctor's news, that Oilla could not disentangle them.

"Come ye in, now," said her father, who was smoking the after-work pipe of evening, which was the sweetest of the day to him. "Ye're looking bothered, like. It all comes o' gadding about i' this heat over-much. Grown men can bear it, but not lile hazel-saplings such as ye."

Oilla only smiled, and went up to her own room. She could not bear to talk just now, even with Yeoman Hirst, the best of all her friends.

"Let a maid alone when she wears that look," Hirst muttered sagely. "I was never much of a hand at tackling whimsies. I'd liefer have a thorn-hedge any day."

The doctor, meanwhile, had passed down Garth street. He was thinking mainly of the good meal and the ease that he had earned, and he frowned as he saw Widow Lister watering her strip of garden front. He knew the little woman by heart, and reined up almost before she had darted into the roadway.

"Oh, doctor, I've been trying to catch you these two days back," she said.

"Well? D'ye want to consult me? Shouldn't say much ailed you, by the plump look o' your cheeks."

The widow simpered a little, and cast down her eyes.

"'Tisn't what ails me, doctor—'tis what might ail me."

"Now, now!" The other was impatient; but, like all men, he was weak in face of the little body's helplessness. "I'll be getting home, Mrs. Lister. What *might* ail you, only Heaven in its wisdom knows. Let me get supper and an hour's smoke until the ailment reaches you; then call me in. I've had nothing since a bite of bread and cheese at noon."

"Ay, but 'tis the fever; ye mustn't jest about it. Bide a wee while, doctor. A few minutes more will make lile difference to ye."

"Won't they?" growled the doctor to himself. "It's just those odd wasted minutes at the day's end, little fool, that break a man up, come to reckon the total at a year's end."

But he waited with some show of patience and listened to this woman who had scarcely had an ache, or done a hard day's work, in all her life.

"'Tis this way, ye see, doctor. I'm not like folk who have cheerful company about me all my time. When I sit by my lone self o' nights I've always the dread o' fever for company, and I take it to my lone bed wi' me. What I want to know is this—suppose I passed a tramping man i' the road, as I did awhile since, and suppose he looked as if he was sickening, like, and suppose——"

The doctor cut her short. "Now I catch your drift. You want to know how long 'twill be before the mulberry spots come out?" he said, with a cheerfulness that shocked Widow Lister. "Something between a week and a fortnight—but I shouldn't be troubled, widow. Fever doesn't take the plump little women—it has over-much respect for them."

"Is that truth, doctor?"

"Ay, as true as that I'm due home for supper. Good-night to you. She'll have another worrit before to-morrow's ended," he added as he jogged down the street. "There's a use for the widow, of course—there's a use for everything created—but it puzzles a man at times to find out what 'tis."

At Ghyll the sleepy dusk had settled into slumber. The day had been tired with its own heat, and the night was wearier still. Gaunt had stretched himself on the lang-settle, after seeing the widow go up to bed. He slept with that death-in-life which comes from sheer exhaustion, and did not hear Mrs. Mathewson creep like a thief down her own stair, did not know that the sneck of the door was lifted quietly.

The widow passed up through the croft and into the moor. The new moon, a sickle of silver-grey, lay over the rowan-tree. Mrs. Mathewson, from old habit, curtsayed to it seven times—for luck—not knowing that she did so. Then she sought the ghyll, and the stream that was too

little and too dry to be heard at all if the faintest breeze had stirred about the heath.

Gaunt had wondered at the widow's strength throughout the day. It was well that he did not see her in her weakness now. All restraint was gone as she knelt by the grave that was not a day old as yet.

"Peggy, my lass! Peggy, ye're all I have i' this world. Reuben's staunch, I know, and I'm fond o' the lad—but 'tis ye I want—'tis ye!"

The weakness of the strong, when at last they are compelled to yield to it, takes its own revenge. Mrs. Mathewson was bewildered, helpless. Then a blind fury seized her; and she cried out on God because He had robbed her, who had so little, of the one thing she prized. And then there came a darkness, a reaching out for help, such as Gaunt had known not long ago at the gate of the croft.

After that a counterfeit of peace stole over her. She was on the borderland between this world and another, and she seemed to reach across and take the girl's hands in her own.

"Ye've strayed, lile lass. Come away back wi' me to Ghyll," she said, grasping the new hope. "Ah, now, ye'd come—surely ye'd come, if your hard old mother asked ye."

Throughout the night she lay beside the grave, sleeping fitfully at times, but oftener lying awake, listening to the trickle of the stream and watching the Milky Way that streaked the sky with jewelled dust. For those few hours she had let weakness have its way with her; but when the pink fingers of the dawn began to touch the hills, she rose. Old habit taught her that the day was meant for work. She was dizzy, her limbs trembled under her, grief had left her stricken in soul and body. She must conquer the trouble, that was all, as she had done at many a long-past dawn.

There had been no freshness, no movement of the breeze, through the night hours; but now the moor seemed to breathe at last, as a little wind got up and played bo-peep among the heather. Not the fingers only, but the broad hands of the dawn, were on the hills. The pink

lights had deepened into crimson, and stretched like beacon fires across the eastern moor. The grey darkness receded from the dingles. Out to the west a sky of tenderest sapphire smoothed the rough edges of the heath.

Widow Mathewson—again from habit—halted to look at the glory of her homeland. She scarcely knew that the well-known pageant was spread out before her; but she gathered heart again and went bravely down to Ghyll. She walked with a man's stride, a man's straight back, and none would have guessed that she was a broken woman, asking no more than to keep her pride until the end.

Gaunt, too, was astir soon after dawn. He stepped out on tiptoe, glad that the widow slept so long, and fearing to awaken her. They met in the mistal-yard.

"Why, mother, I fancied you were sleeping," said Gaunt.

"Fancies are well enough for night-time, Reuben, but they don't last long after dawn. I stretched i' my sleep, I did, and I saw the light twinkling on the panes, and I bethought me that the farm work needed looking to. So I stepped down and out."

"You might have waked me."

"Nay, ye were sleeping over-sound. Mathewson was never much of a man, but even he was snappish when I wakened him before his time."

It was in this way that she chose to meet the future. There would be no more stolen vigils u' der the rowan-tree, no undermining of her courage. With a sudden gust of feeling, she understood that Gaunt was the only living hope she had to rest upon—and there was danger to him.

"Reuben," she said gravely, "the long watch has begun. The days will seem long i' passing before we know we're safe."

"We'll weather them, never fear. Best not think of to-morrow at all, but get on with our work."

The widow glanced at him with keen scrutiny. "There's a deal o' sense hidden somewhere about ye, Reuben. Seems ye feared to let it peep out till now."

CHAPTER XXI

RAIN

NEITHER Gaunt nor Widow Mathewson was prepared for the quiet and temperate beauty that crept into their waiting-time at Ghyll. The fever, like offal dug round the roots of a sturdy plant, seemed to bring finer and more sweet-smelling flowers to blossom in the last result. Its ugliness, its power to bring loathing and misery to these two at Ghyll, were instruments of a soul-refining fragrant as the breath of wild thyme on the moors.

If Gaunt had neglected his farming work in old days, it was through idleness, not from lack of knowledge. Acquaintance with all details of field and stable and mistal had been bred in him, and the widow watched him go about the usual round of work with growing wonder.

"A hired man would have done half as much i' the day, and done it badly," she said, finding him milking the cows one evening.

"Oh, 'tis only the old proverb, mother—the master-man always works the better, if he has the will. 'Tis not often that he has the will, ye see."

She watched him persuade the last of the cows to be friendly with the milking-pail, listened awhile to the pleasant splash-splash of the milk.

"Reuben," she said, with a touch of jealousy, "yond's the sauciest beast o' them all, and ye seem to have her at a word. She wouldn't let any but me milk her—not even Peggy, though she'd deft hands at the udders. And, Reuben, ye're doing too much. Leave some bit o' work

for me to do, lest I get thinking o' what's past and done with."

"We'll share and share alike," said Gaunt, looking over-shoulder from his seat on the milking-stool.

"Some folk have queer notions o' sharing. I tell ye I've not been so idle o' my hands since I was a girl."

"All the better, mother. You've earned a rest by this time, while I—well, perhaps I've earned a spell of work," he broke off, with something of the widow's own grim humour.

The busy needs of the farm were already helping these two to forget their burden. To Gaunt it seemed strange, profane almost, that sorrow for the dead should give place to workaday anxieties; to the widow, who was older in experience, it was plain that such work brought with it the gift of healing.

All the routine at Ghyll was interrupted. It had thrived on its trade in milk, and cheese, and butter. Now Widow Mathewson, and Gaunt, and the three pigs fattening in the sty at the far side of the mistal, were left to drink what they could of milk that once had supplied half Garth's needs; the rest, save what was needed for their own week's butter-making, had to be poured out into the parched and thirsty croft.

"It seems a waste," said Gaunt to-night, after they had filled the bowl in the dairy, and fed the pigs, and now stood watching the rest of the milk run down the croft in a narrow stream.

"That's the good farmer cropping out again in ye, Reuben. Of course 'tis wasteful—but there's a deal of waste i' life, as I've found it. 'Tis one o' the things we have to put up with, like. I was never good at a riddle; parson down yonder, maybe, could tell us why bairns are crying out i' Garth for this milk we're spilling—milk their mothers dar'n't fetch or send for."

Reuben watched the streamlet die down, a dirty white across the sun-scorched brown of the grass. Then he linked

his arm in hers and drew her toward the farm, and set her down in the hooded chair by the hearth, while he found her pipe for her.

"Good sakes!" said the widow, softly. "To be waited on at my time o' life—and by you of all men, Reuben!"

"That's the queerness of things again," he answered, lighting his own pipe.

In other days there had been between them the silence of would-be enmity; now there was that lack of speech which friends use when they wish to talk together. Once Gaunt stirred the peats with his foot, and glanced at the widow's face when the fire-glow lit it.

"Seeking for signs o' fever, Reuben?" she asked drily, turning her sharp, old eyes to his.

"Well, yes, I was, as you've caught me at it. I should miss you if—if aught happened, mother."

"Naught happens to me, Reuben, lad, save wear and tear. Would ye say that again—that ye'd miss me, if I went out along Peggy's road?"

"There's none else to care for me, since Peggy died. I've had little care and little love i' my short life, mother—that's why they call me 'running water,' maybe."

Her memory went back to the days when she had been housekeeper to Reuben's father. She recalled the hard-riding, hard-drinking master who had reared his son to the like gospel. She remembered the night when Billy the Fool was brought to Marshlands, and was afterwards turned out into the cold to answer for the sins of other folk. Many a bygone incident of Reuben's boyhood stole out from those corners of the mind which hide things half forgotten. And again she told herself, as she had told Priscilla on a day of April snow, that Reuben Gaunt had his father to thank for Marshlands and the money, but for no other chance in life.

"Reuben," she said, blowing quiet puffs of smoke across the hearth, "have you no thought for yourself these days? Naught matters much for me either way—but fear o' death comes natural to younger folk."

"There's you and the farm to think of, mother. That's enough to carry me forward."

Then he led her on to talk of olden times, for he had learned already that it was her surest road to peace. He mixed her rum and milk, and set it down on the ledge at the right-hand of the hooded chair, and coaxed a smile from her and a crisp assurance that "living with ne'er-do-wells was sure to lead ye into loose ways." She talked of Peggy's childhood, recounted a score of escapades, with a mother's pitiful and tender regard for detail. She spoke of her husband, and laughed slily at his weaknesses. It is in this way that bereaved folk find shelter sometimes, for their little hour, from the bleak face of death.

"Mathewson was as he was made," she finished, "and I'll not say aught against one that's gone—but he was shammocky, Reuben. If it was no bigger job than sticking a row o' peas, he was shammocky still. He'd start the job after breakfast, and put in happen a dozen sticks; then he'd sit on the wall, and light his pipe, and look at what he'd done till I came out, and flicked him off the wall-top; and somewhere about nightfall, if I was lucky and could get fro' my work often enough to stir him up, he'd have finished yond row o' peas. Then he'd step indoors, and draw himself a mug of ale, and say he'd always known there was naught like good, honest work for making a body enjoy his sup o' beer. Poor Mathewson! He was as he was made, and he never varied much. Now, Peggy came of a different breed."

And Gaunt listened to her praise of Peggy, putting in a word here, or a question there, till it was bedtime. The widow rose at last, and took a rush-candle from the mantel.

"Well, we'd best be getting to sleep, Reuben. Ye'll lie on the settle, as on other nights? I've had many a watch-dog in my time, lad, but ye're the best o' the lot, I fancy. I sleep sounder when I know that ye're below-stairs."

There was affection in the glance she gave him; and

Reuben, when he lay down to sleep an hour later, found no ill dreams to trouble him.

Yet these two had not been open with each other. The widow had concealed her visit to the grave three nights ago. Gaunt had concealed the dread that beset him through the daytime.

The dread awoke with him the next morning, and dogged his footsteps as he went across the croft. It kept close beside him until noon, when he came home over the burnt-up fields in search of dinner. He had known no fear until Peggy died. There had been the hope that she would recover, the need of constant listening for a call to the bedside; but now hope and the urgent need were gone, and life for its own sake was sweet again to Gaunt. Fever, and the all but certain death, had grown to the shape of Bargnest, the brown dog, that haunted the legends of the moorland.

He halted now at the gate where Peggy had kissed him for the last time. He looked at the sun, set high in a sky of blue that had no soul behind it—a sky as hard as beaten metal, that seemed to press upon the earth and keep in the suffocating heat. If ever a man prayed for rain, Gaunt prayed for it low with a whole heart. He sought for one wisp of cloud to break the fierce monotony of blue. There was none. Each undulation of the hilltops showed strangely clear, as if cut by a keen-edged knife. The silence was unbearable.

Gaunt's courage, when he chose to enter Ghyll and share its dangers was child's play to the pluck that now was asked of him. There was no longer any warmth of impulse, no zest in sacrifice for its own fine sake; fear had reached him, and the shelterless heat weakened every effort at resistance, till there were times when dread merged into outright panic and set him trembling like a child. He would recover, win back his manhood with the dogged perseverance that had won him the fell-race; then, and not before, he would seek out the widow, and day by day

she found him stronger, more considerate, more bent on naming her "mother," and on proving himself a real son.

This morning, as he leaned over the gate and searched for rain-clouds, he went through one of these battles of despair. When it was nearly ended, and the colour was returning to his face, the doctor's big, fiddle-headed nag came up the slope, and Gaunt started when the rider's voice broke the silence.

"What news, Mr. Gaunt?" he asked, reining in and giving Reuben a quick, professional glance.

"No news," Gaunt answered, with a touch of dry humour. "We're penned like birds in a cage, doctor, and have nothing to listen to, save this cursed silence. If you could give us a promise of rain, now——"

"Well, I can help you there," put in the other briskly. "I ought to have learned something from the weather by this time, for I've been plagued enough by it. The hot spell is nearly done with, though you may call me a fool for prophesying in face of such a sky as that."

It was curious to see how eagerly Reuben caught at the hope. This conspiracy of sun and stark, blue sky against him had grown to be in sober fact a menace; a few more days of the strain, and fear might give an easy inroad to the fever.

"There's not a sign of it," he said, anxious to have his words disproved.

"Wait till you've had twenty years more of this queer climate, Mr. Gaunt, and then you may be just beginning to know it. I've seen a dozen little signs of rain as I came up the heath; but I trust more to what old Lamach of High Farm calls a feeling in his bones."

Gaunt remembered the doctor's reputation as a weather-seer. "I hope to God you're in the right, doctor."

"Of course I'm in the right! 'Tis a habit of mine; only a fool puts himself in the wrong. I'm right, too—under Providence, you understand—in saying that you and the widow will w n through. Tough, both of you—not

cowards—plenty of fresh air inside your bodies ; oh, you'll weather it. Well, good-day, Mr. Gaunt ; I've a long round before me."

Gaunt would not let him go just yet. It was a relief to exchange any sort of talk with another man. "We've noticed that you ride past the gate once every day, doctor, since you knew fever had come."

"Well, what of that !" said the other, testily.

"Only that 'tis kindly of you. We're a bit lonesome, I own, though we make the best of it."

"Never heard such nonsense ! Doctoring is my trade, Mr. Gaunt, not riding up and down the country doing good works. I leave those—and the credit of 'em—to the parson. I'm no poacher. I've a bothersome case, I tell you, two miles further on, and this is my shortest cut."

Gaunt knew that there was no short cut in this direction, except to the empty moor. He knew that the doctor lengthened his round each day to halt for a word at the gate, and to learn if his services were needed. "Which farm are you bound for, then ?" he asked, with gentle banter.

"Which farm ? Good-day, Mr. Gaunt, good-day. I'm too busy a man to answer idle questions."

Gaunt went slowly up to the house, feeling more at peace with this world of heat and toil and martyrdom. The doctor had been right in thinking that they needed physic here at Ghyll. It was no physic carried in his pocket, to be taken three times a day and put on the shelf after a dose or two had been swallowed ; it was the medicine carried by all men who have faced life in the open—that of forward hope, and a call to look up to the hilltops rather than down to the misty valleys.

"The doctor has ridden by again," said Reuben, as he stepped into the living-room to find dinner waiting for him. "I had a talk with him."

"Ay, 'tis his way," answered the widow. "If aught happens, like, to ye or me, he'll not ride by. He'll just

walk in, Reuben, same as ye did when Peggy was taken wi' the fever. Men are terrible folk for pranks, and so I always did say. Now, ye'll sit down, and eat what I set before ye. A roast o' mutton, Reuben, done to a turn. It's fool's policy to keep your body underfed at these times."

Of all the details that hampered Widow Mathewson and Gaunt, none pressed on them more heavily than this need to sit at meat together. The reek of the hot joint, the loss of appetite engendered by the long, persistent drought, made such a meal seem loathsome. Each ate for the other's sake, and sparingly at that.

"Never smoked so much i' my life," said the widow, reaching up for her pipe after dinner. "I've no knowledge o' the lad that first brought 'baccy into Garth, but he did a service to us weak, human folk. Fill up your mug, Reuben, and come and sit in front o' the fire, and talk to a body, like. I'm fair spent wi' weariness."

At dusk of the same day the doctor finished his round and rode into Garth. It happened, as it had happened for three days past, that Priscilla was loitering in the roadway fronting Good Intent; it was not a habit of hers, and the doctor guessed her motive, and responded to it with the quiet, charitable humour that marked all his dealings with the dalesfolk.

"I'm in rare good-humour, Miss Cilla," he said, drawing rein. "D'ye see those bits of fleecy clouds coming up across the moon?"

"I had not looked at the sky," she answered absently. "It is ever the same these days, and one grows tired of it."

"Ay, but 'twill not be the same when you wake to-morrow. I was up at Ghyll this morning——"

"Yes?" put in Cilla, with sudden interest.

"And I pitted my weather-lore against Gaunt's. He said it couldn't rain if it tried, and I said it was bound to."

He saw Cilla's hand go up to her heart for a moment, saw the brightness creep into her face. He had known all

along that she needed to be told that Gaunt, so far, was well, and it had pleased him to wrap up the news in this talk about the weather.

"They—they are both well at Ghyll?" she asked.

"As sound as can be. I've an interest in those two, Miss Cilla. They deserve to come through it all, and somehow I fancy that they will."

"They say the chances are against it——"

"Oh, they say a good deal of nonsense, time and time. There's naught like pluck for winning a fight. Good-night to you, and pray that I miss Widow Lister as I ride by. Three days ago she was afraid of fever; this morning she caught me on the outward journey, and, 'Doctor,' she said, 'I've caught a chill that may well bring me to my grave.' I laughed—as I do, Miss Cilla, in season and out—and, 'You're lucky,' I said. 'If I could find a touch o' chill under this brassen sky, I'd be glad of the relief, and so would my sweating horse.' Good-night again, like Cilla. Gaunt's not going to die just yet, and I begin to think he might be worth your taking one day."

Cilla listened to the pit-pat of hoofs as it grew faint and fainter down the dusty road. The doctor had earned his right-of-way to folk's hearts after many an uphill climb, and his power to help his neighbours was not limited to their bodies' needs. Whenever he felt that death was certain he told his patient bluntly that the next world, not this, was his concern; while there was doubt he thrust down his throat, willy-nilly, the physic of hope, and sweetened the draught, so far as he could, with some racy village jest.

"There's a good man goes down Garth street," thought Cilla, following the other's sturdy figure as it disappeared among the shadows.

The moon lay young, slender as a sickle, over the parched lands of Garth. Cilla herself, as she stood in the roadway, looked cool and slender, too, in her white gown, though she was full of strange disquiet. Her modesty had taken

fright. It was well enough to be anxious for Reuben's safety, well enough to seek news of him as often as she could ; but she knew that it was more than friendship, this restless eagerness for news. And Peggy o' Mathewson's should have been a bride by now ; and the peat was scarcely smoothed above her grave.

Cilla, for all her daintiness, her love of clean thinking and clean doing, was human as her neighbours, and subject to those gusts of warm and reckless feeling which are apt to scatter the habits of a lifetime. If she had been told of another who waited, as she had done, for news of a bridegroom widowed before his wedding-day, she would have thought lightly of her. Yet she could only picture Reuben up at the lonely, hilltop farm, could only pray for his safety, and know that her prayers came from a warmer heart than she ought to carry.

She turned instinctively to Good Intent. Her father would be sitting by the hearth, big of his body, big in charity. She would step in and have a talk with him.

The yeoman was sitting in his chair, as she had pictured him ; but his pipe lay cold in his hand, and he motioned her gravely to a seat in the settle-corner opposite.

"Cilla, I've had a talk or two wi' the doctor," he began.

She waited, suppressing a quiet laugh that he, too, had gone out for stolen interviews with the lay priest of Garth.

"It seems Gaunt *choss* to go into Ghyll Farm, and to stay there. He knew what it meant before ever he crossed the door-stone. I wouldn't believe it until the doctor told me it was so."

"Yes, father."

"Well, I'm durned if I'd have done it."

"Oh, yes—oh, indeed, you would have done it—father, 'tis the sort of call you'd have answered, but it was not asked of you."

"Fiddle-de-dee," said the yeoman. "Black fever would

always scare me. Give me a runaway horse, and I'll keep my seat on his back; but the fever's a waiting game, like Oilla, and I could never play such. I've a sort of envy, like, of men who can."

Priscilla lit a spill for his pipe. She filled his glass for him, and set it by his side; and then she waited.

"Seems I've treated Gaunt amiss," said her father by-and-by.

"All folk do in Garth."

"Ay, they *did*; but I was down in Shepston to-day, and they had the news, and folk were puzzled. They fancied Gaunt was better than they'd thought him; in fact, Oilla, they seemed minded to turn face about and overdo their praising of him."

Oilla spread her hands to the peat-glow, and her face was full of tenderness. "I told you so i' the spring, father, but you would not listen."

The yeoman was uneasy. Praise was due to Gaunt, and yet he distrusted the man. "He comes of a bad breed, Oilla, and I'm farmer enough to know that you don't rear good stock from such."

Oilla was quiet, but eager. "We all know his father's story—but what of his mother? Had she no say in the matter?"

"Why, yes; she was well enough, and a long way too good for old Gaunt; but she died when Reuben was a bairn. She never had a chance to better his wild up-bringing."

And then at last, after an uneasy silence, the yeoman got to the heart of the matter. His fondness for Oilla was embarrassing at times; it gave him too keen an insight into any change of mood in her, and he had guessed the secret of this restlessness which had fallen on her since the fever-news first came from Ghyll.

"Like lass," he said, "I've been thinking a deal to-night, and I wish more than ever that ye'd persuaded David the Smith to stay on in Garth. Whether ye wouldn't have

him, or whether his big hulking shyness stood up between the two o' ye, and wouldn't let him ask ye, 'tis not for me to say; but I'm more than ever sorry, lass, as things have turned out."

"Why, father?" A delicate colour had crept into Cilla's face, but there was that steady light in her eyes which the yeoman feared.

"Well, Reuben is free to go wandering again——"

"No, no!" Her treason to the dead seemed baser than it had done in the silence of the road outside. This outspoken hint of it from another showed all its meanness to the girl's sensitive fancy. "No, father! We must not talk of such—of such foolishness. Reuben may be dead before the month is out."

"Well, yea," said Hirst, soberly. "Maybe I spoke out of season, Cilla. There, lass! Gaunt has done what I dare not, and I'm 'shamed to own it, and I'm hoping he'll come through all, as he deserves."

So then Cilla came and sat at his knee, for the intimacy between these two was full of understanding. Her father was quick to blame himself for the few ungenerous thoughts that came his way, and she knew how hard it was for him at any time to speak well of Reuben Gaunt.

"And not only that," she went on. "Reuben may be this or that, father, but he has seen Peggy o' Mathewson die, and he has helped to bury her, so the doctor tells me, and—and, father, I think we ought to leave him with his thoughts—they'll be sad ones."

Cilla was diffident, as a good woman is when she must run counter to a well-loved father. The yeoman looked at her for a moment, then laid down his pipe, and lifted her to the arm of his big chair.

"Seems to me I'm a child i' your hands at times, Cilla. Oh, ye're right, lile lass. There were better and bigger men than Gaunt in Shepston to-day, but not one o' them has done what he did."

The sickle moon climbed up that night till it lay over

Ghyll Farm, and the tired folk who slept there. It lay, too, over the rowan that sheltered one whose weariness was over and done with. On the moor, where the thin stream trickled down, whispering a prayer of peace to Peggy as it passed her grave, there was the keen breath of life again. First, the moon was shrouded; then clouds as slight as gossamer came drifting up the breeze; and after that a little wind got up, piping thin and high like a plover tired with the long day's flight.

It was very still on the moor, save for the soft, insistent crying of the wind. A wayfarer, had he been crossing the untilled acres, might have heard God walking in this sweet and untamed wilderness. The wind, slight as it was, was full of perseverance, and it began now to shepherd the running vanguards of the mist across the heath.

At three of the morning there was neither moon nor sky to be seen. A wide sheet of mist, wet to the touch, hid every landmark of the moor which, until an hour ago, had shown plainly all its jagged hillocks, its raking, hill-top lines. And dawn, when it came, could do no more than thread the cloud-banks through with tints of silver-grey.

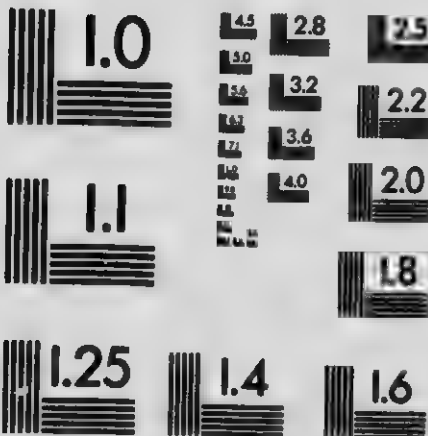
Gaunt, soon after daybreak, woke from his sleep on the lang-settle, with instinctive knowledge that another day's glare had to be faced, and crossed to the window. At first he thought himself mistaken in the hour, so dark the room was. Then he unbarred the door and went out into the mist. He felt its fingers wet about his face and hands; he drew deep breaths of it, as men drink in the first spring warmth after a hard winter. Then he laughed, not knowing why, and leaned against the house-wall, and was glad to rest still awhile, with this sense of peace and freedom round him.

The physical relief, the damp freshness after long heat, were part only of a deeper change. His fever-dread had left him; he no longer felt the need to hold his courage tightly step by step through the day's uphill climb, lest it failed him at the pinch.



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"Oh, God be thanked," he murmured, and went in-doors. "Mother, I've news for you!" he called up the stone stairway.

The widow had slept later than her wont, but she was awake in a moment. "What is it, Reuben?" she answered, fearing disaster always when an urgent summons came.

"The blessed rain is coming. We'll have cloudy skies again."

"Now, there's a ha'porth of nonsense to fetch a body out of bed with," grumbled the other. "'Tisn't dawn, Reuben, surely; winter-dark, I call it."

"Come down and see, mother."

She was soon at the porch-door beside him; and Gaunt, watching her face, could see the lines of strain grow softer, as if the mist had filled their hollows in with kindly fingers. They stood there, the two of them, as if they could never have too much of the grey, cool air; and the heat of the past weeks, as they looked back on it from this sanctuary, seemed like that of the burning, fiery furnace which both remembered from teachings of a far-off childhood.

There was nothing fanciful about this change of theirs from fear to strength. Bred in a country which knew more of cloudy skies than blue, they needed rain after long abstention from it; and the mist was a sure herald of grace to come.

"'Tis queer how the weather has ye at a word, Reuben," said the widow, presently. "I'm keen set for my breakfast, and that's more than I could say for a week o' days."

She would not have the door closed while they fried the rashers and the eggs, though the mist stole in and lay like smoke about the room.

"Now, don't ye go shutting the door against a friend," she said, when Reuben made a movement to close it. "I'm only too thankful, lad, to feel the cool of it."

Later that day—a little past noon—the mist found its proper shape, and fell in drops as quiet and as persistent as the breeze that pushed it forward. By sundown it was

raining steadily, and for the first time since their watch began, these two slept well.

When Gaunt woke, late the next morning, the rain was lapping at the windows, with a stealthy, greedy patience that promised more to come.

The mist had gone when he went out into the croft, and there was a blur of sunshine through the rain. The thirsty ground sucked in the moisture, and asked for more, and still showed riven cracks as dry as the molten heaven of two days ago; and from the pastures a ground-mist rose, thick and smoky as the reek from the smithy down at Garth when Fool Billy was coaxing his fire into a blaze.

Out of the rain, and the under-mist that reached up above his horse's hocks, the doctor came to Ghyll.

"All well, Mr. Gaunt?" he asked, with a note of strict routine in his voice.

"Better for this God-sent weather, doctor."

"Oh, that's your view, is it? I'm wet to the skin, and am like to be wetter before I've done. This quiet sort of rain goes deeper than your hasty storms. Still, it will clear the air, maybe, and you'll remember that I prophesied it.—Mr. Gaunt," he broke off, with one of his sudden glances, as if he were probing a patient with the knife, "d'ye feel any lassitude—well, to put it plainly, d'ye feel the world is slipping from under you, like a crazy limestone wall when you try to climb it?"

"Well, no," said Gaunt, the new hope glowing in his cheeks. "I did, till the rain came; and I was as near to fright as ever I've been in my life; but that's all gone. Mrs. Mathewson has taken fresh heart, too."

The doctor looked him over once more. "I'm not here to play Providence," he said, with an air of quiet relief. "This horse of mine, with his fiddle-head, could never carry so heavy a burden as Providence; but I think, Mr. Gaunt, you may let me take word to Marshlands that they can begin to get ready for you—air the sheets, and dust the rooms, and all the nonsense women like."

"I shall be needed here for awhile," said Reuben.

"That's as you please."

The two men stood looking at each other with great friendliness, though in years past their intercourse, on the doctor's side at least, had had more than a touch of chill in it. Gaunt had not given that side of the matter a thought; yet these weeks at Ghyll had divided, like a deep gulf, the old days and the new. Whatever lightness he showed in future, his neighbours would look behind it, and would see a stricken farmstead instead and a man entering it of his own free will to succour others. The folk of Garth were slow, maybe, to form new opinions of men, or crops, or weather; but in the long run they were just, and they did not forget.

The doctor read a good deal in Reuben's face just now. There was a light of happiness in it—unquestioning, child-like happiness, dimmed just a little by awe and some bewilderment. He had seen the look often when one or other of his patients had lain near to death, and had lived on to watch another spring spread magic fingers over a world that now was doubly sweet to them.

"It is not so easy to die as I thought, doctor," said Reuben, breaking the silence unexpectedly. "You never know how fond you are of being chained to this daft world, until—well, till you begin to listen for the snapping of the chains."

"I'd be sorry to leave it myself," said the doctor, with his big, heathen laugh. "They work me to death, and I've seldom an hour to call my own, and first I'm baked with sun-heat, and then I'm chilled by this mist-rain you're so fond of, till I scarce know whether I'm dead or alive; but, bless ye, Mr. Gaunt, there's some queer sort of joy in living, after all. Besides," he added, with a touch of pleasantry, "there's a certain doubt as to what comes after."

"There is," murmured Gaunt, though he would have been slow to confess as much at another time. "I fancy 'twas the doubt that troubled me, when I looked up at the sky and felt the brazen heat."

"Just my feeling!" said the other, cheerily. "It might be hotter out beyond—or again, it might be mistier—I never liked extremes."

Once more a silence fell between them, and still the doctor lingered, because he knew that Gaunt was weak after long strain and needed a man's chatter in his ears.

"Undoubtedly I'm a lost soul," he went on. "Widow Lister told me as much last night, when she caught me riding home, and got me to poultice a boil the size of a pin-head, and then gave me a sermon because I hadn't the fear of the Lord in me. 'If I'd as much fear of the Lord, Widow, as you have of your body,' I said, 'they'd count me righteous in Garth.'"

Reuben laughed. He knew Widow Lister, and the doctor's racy tongue had brought the picture clearly to his mind. And somehow neither wished to get on with the business of the day just yet.

"I've a weakness for Widow Mathewson myself—I'd the same feelin' for poor Peggy," said the doctor, presently. "I begin to have a touch of it for you, Mr. Gaunt."

"What sort of feeling, doctor?"

"Well, a 'birds-of-a-feather' feeling. We're all of us moor-top folk. There's little of the heathen in me; I've seen too much of human sorrow to feel aught but fear of God. But my God's different—yours is, and the widow's is, and poor Peggy's was—and I catch a sight of Him when I think myself too weary for aught but supper and bed afterwards. When I'm riding over the moor, Mr. Gaunt, at the end of a long day's work, and the hills get up in front of my fiddle-headed horse, and the wind blows low through the heather, I find myself listening to the fairies. Oh, we doctors learn a thing or two when we ride, with tired bodies and clear eyes, over the moor-top home to supper."

Gaunt had not been permitted to see this side of the man before, and his surprise showed in his face, perhaps, for the doctor gathered up his reins and laughed shame-facedly.

"No, no, Mr. Gaunt," he said in his gruffest voice, "I'm

not going to enter any ministry. Foolish thoughts *will* slip out at times. Now, you mean to stop here awhile longer? I think I'll ride home by way of Marshlands, all the same. Scared as they are, they'll be glad of my news. I shall tell that hulking hind of yours, Peter Wood, to bring you up a change of clothes and linen. It was useless before, but now you can burn all you stand up in, and put on something that doesn't carry any memory of the fever with it. You've burned all the sick-room things, by the way—bedding, and hangings, and what not?"

Gaunt nodded. "And whitewashed every corner afterwards. Mrs. Mathewson would have it so."

"Bless me, a couple of sensible folk seem to be living at Ghyll! All as practical and trim as if I'd had the overlooking of it myself."

"Well, you see, doctor," said the other, with a smile that had no mirth in it, "it was a big job we'd undertaken, and big jobs are worth doing thoroughly, once you take them up. There was no need for us to help Ghyll become a plague-spot for the whole of Garth."

"Oh, the world's standing on her head, Mr. Gaunt! The tough old doctor suspected of leanings towards the ministry, and you preaching thoroughness. There, there, I must have my jest. There's no offence, I hope?"

With a cheery nod and a jerk of the reins the doctor was trotting up the moor, leaving the wholesome crispness of a north-west wind behind him.

At ten of the next morning Reuben heard a shout as he crossed from the mistal-yard. Peter Wood, the hind at Marshlands, stood midway up the croft. He carried a bundle in his arms, and his knees were shaking.

"I dursn't come no farther, sir—I dursn't." The big, ungainly lad was almost blubbering as he stood, a figure of woe, in the drenching sheets of rain. "Doctor said I'd to bring these, and I've brought 'em, but never a stride nearer Ghyll will I come. Couldn't, sir, if I tried; my feet willun't let me."

"Nobody asked you. Set your bundle down, and I'll fetch it when you've taken your precious body out of harm's way. Is all right with the farm, Peter?"

"Ay, the farm's all right, and the folk in it are all right so far; but——"

"Oh, knock all that nonsense out of your head, lad! You'll not take fever, if that is what's troubling you. Tell them I may be home in a week to stir you all out of your laziness—or it may be a fortnight; it depends on whether I'm needed here."

Peter's wits were never over-strong, and terror had not sharpened them; yet even he was conscious of a new note in the master's voice—a note less easy-going than of old and fuller of authority. The lad glanced down the croft, then up at Reuben, but still held his ground; it was plain that he wished to get as far away from Ghyll as possible, and yet that he was held by some counter-fear.

"Is it true what they say, sir," he blurted out, "that a body can catch the fever just by looking at another body that's been nigh it?"

"No," said Reuben, with a laugh that heartened Peter a little, "it's a lie. Most fears are lies, my lad, and you can tell them so from me down at Marshlands yonder."

"Thank ye, sir," said Peter, laying down his bundle in the wet, and making off with a speed that recalled the haste of Dan Foster's lad not long ago.

When Gaunt stepped into the house, carrying his dripping bundle, Widow Mathewson looked up from her baking-board.

"What have ye there, Reuben?"

"Clean linen, and a change of clothes. It sounds naught much, mother, but, Lord, how I need to get into them! Seems the doctor knew how I wanted them, for it was his thought to send them up."

The widow laid down her rolling-pin, rubbed some of the flour from her arms, then looked at Gaunt with her straight, hazel eyes.

"That means you're ready for flitting. Well, I mustn't grumble, though I'll miss you sorely. Life's made up o' settlings in and flittings out, as the throstle said when she watched her fledged brood fly."

"But I'm not flitting, mother, not for a week or two yet." He was touched by the loneliness, the proud independence, of her appeal. "I'm needed here, ye see, what with you alone in the house, and the farm work to be seen to; and, besides, they'd be scared to death at Marshlands if I gave them no time to get used to the notion of my coming back. They'd be down with fever the next day, or think they were."

"You're a good lad, Reuben," she said, after a pause. "Give me your bundle, and let me set your things to the fire. 'Twill be rheumatiz ye'll catch if ye put them on as they are."

In the afternoon the sun got out for an hour, for the rain was tired of its own vehemence. Gaunt put the clothes, warm and with the peat-smell of the fire on them, under his arm, and went up the moor, past Peggy's grave, past the little, grey bridge where the harebells were reviving from the drought. Just above the bridge was a pool known to him of old; it had dwindled during the hot months, but the rains had filled it almost bank-high.

Gaunt stripped and plunged into the stream. The glare and misery of the past weeks seemed to yield to this gentle lapping of the peat-brown water. He had done his work well for once in his heedless life, and knew it; and the way of Peggy's death, the squalor and the terror of it, were washed clean by the stream that sucked, and laughed, and gurgled round the edges of the pool.

A curlew came and looked at him as he splashed in the brown water. A burn-trout finned its way up-stream, and turned in fright when it found a four-limbed monster in its favourite pool. For the rest he had no company, and needed none.

CHAPTER XXII

THE GOLD SEPTEMBER

REUBEN was home again at Marshlands. His housekeeper still watched him carefully when she brought in his meals, and Peter, the farm lad, stood at least ten feet away when the master came out into the yard to give his orders. Only Michael, the head-man about the farm, showed common sense.

"Fever's like a turnip-lanthorn," said Michael a few days after the master's return. "Ye've only to light the bogie, and set it up in a dark corner, and watch 'em running for dear life. Oh, by the heart, sir, I'd liefer face it any day as ye did than go running into my burrow like a rabbit every time a kitty-call comes over the pastures!"

Little by little, however, memory of the panic grew dulled. Ten days of rain, with scarcely an hour's cessation now and then, were followed by exquisite, crisp sunshine, till Yeoman Hirst declared that the face of the land "looked as clean washed as a babby's." The breeze was sweet and nutty to the smell. Flowers, checked till now by the drought, began to show out of their proper season, while September's natural brood stirred into blossom in every field and hedgerow. It was a season such as puts new heart into men, whether they admit the weather's influence or make pretence of denial.

The fever, too, had spent itself. In Shepston there was a case here and there at longer and longer intervals, but none further up the dale.

"Oh, I don't want to boast," said Hirst to Cilla on one

of these clear autumn evenings, as they watched the sun go down, "but it seems like as if the fever couldn't bear to touch bonnie Garth. 'Twas afraid to spoil her face, I reckon."

"There, father!" laughed Oilla, with that pleasant linking of her arm in his which was full of comradeship. "I believe you love Garth village better than any soul that lives in it."

"Well, no," answered the yeoman, his voice rising to a roar of affectionate goodwill. "There's ye, Oilla, lass—but Garth runs a good second, I should say."

Oilla was quietly happy these days, though she would admit no reason for it. On every side she heard guarded praise of Reuben; for the doctor, who seldom spoke ill of a man, was fond of spreading good reports abroad when honesty allowed it. It was known now in Garth, not only that Reuben had chosen to go into Ghyll and share its troubles, but that afterwards they had done all they could, he and the widow, to keep the plague from spreading down to the valley.

Priscilla did not ask herself why praise of Reuben was so welcome. She simply let the gold September days drift by, and sometimes cried o' nights when she thought of Peggy o' Mathewson's sleeping beside the moorland burn. It was Oilla's way to cry for others when her own happiness took shape.

At Marshlands, maybe, the servants relished the change in Gaunt less than their neighbours did. They found the master more intent on details of the farm and house than he had been; he went roaming less often, for a day or a week, and they were not free to drive Michael wild with their taunt of, "Well, the master idles all his time—why shouldn't such as us?"

"The fever's gone to his head, though he fancied he'd 'scaped it," said the housekeeper sagely to Rachel, the dairy-maid, as she watched the butter-making. "I was always told that it left its marks on a man, did fever."

She was right. The fever had gone, not only to Reuben's head, but to the heart of the man. He had never been trusted before as Widow Mathewson had trusted him. He had not been asked—save when he ran the Linsall fell-race gallantly—whether his courage were sound as his wind. No one had taught him the way of his manhood until that time of stress at Ghyll; but now he was moving with uncertain steps, like a child first finding its feet, along his proper road.

Oilla met him one forenoon on the bridle-path that ran through Raindrift Wood. For once in a way he was on foot, like herself, and not on horseback; and they stood looking at each other, startled by the sudden meeting.

"We—we have heard pleasant things about you, Mr. Gaunt," said the girl, trying to break down their disquiet, "and—and, indeed, we are glad that—that nothing happened to you up at Ghyll."

"I did what was needed, and was glad to be needed," he answered simply. "There was nothing at all to talk about, though you know how folk build up a molehill and swear 'tis a mountain."

Oilla glanced quietly at him. He had come out a changed man from the furnace of those weeks at Ghyll. The easy, self-assertive jauntiness was gone; his small affectations of speech and manner were lost, and he spoke and carried himself as a yeoman should. The restless glitter, too, had gone from his eyes, and his look was that of a man who had lately met life face to face. He was thin and haggard: yet Oilla was conscious only of some new strength in him.

"Tell me of—of Peggy," she said softly. "I was grieved when the news came down to Garth."

"She died without a good-bye. That was the hardest thing to bear. If there had been a half-hour given us for talk before she went, it would have seemed easier. I was in need of forgiveness, maybe——"

He stopped, and his eyes sought hers gravely. Oilla

could feel nothing but a great tenderness, a sudden rush of pity. He was so quiet under punishment, so ready to admit that it was well deserved.

"You were always fond of seeing fresh places," she said. "Leave Garth for awhile, will you not, until—until the memory of it all grows softened?"

For the first time Gaunt smiled. "I've taken just the opposite notion into my head. Marshlands is a biggish place, and needs a master over it. They will tell you in Garth that it has not known much of the master-hand these last years."

Generous always in compassion, she could not check herself, but laid her hand on his arm impulsively. "Never think that again! They tell different stories of you now in Garth."

"Yea, yea," put in Reuben, with a touch of the weariness that would keep him company for many a day. "They're full of praise I haven't a need for. By-and-by they'll forget, and I shall be 'Mister Running-Water' to them once again. 'Tis well to know one's by-name."

"Oh, you must not be bitter! I tell you, they have changed——"

"Just so." His pride was touched in some unexpected way. "They call a fresh fiddle-tune—but are they sure I'll dance to it?"

And Cilla liked his stubbornness, liked the gravity which was so far remote from her earlier knowledge of him. They said good-bye in Raindrift Wood, and Gaunt went slowly home, wondering that Cilla and he could meet, not like lovers who had walked the fieldways when spring was warm and urgent, but like friends who were old and tranquil as this month of gold September.

At Marshlands, only Michael, his head-man, had faith in the master's purpose; the others said that he would tire of farming in a week or two more, because it stood to reason that running water must be gadding off somewhere or another.

Michael's face grew cheerier as the days went on. He saw the master keeping close at home; he saw the dairy work grow cleaner, the maids and the farm lads doing a day's work in a day instead of taking two to it. Michael felt no jealousy. He had always had the farm's interest at heart, and had known that he could not rule the house until the master set his own back to the work of supervision and ceased from wandering.

Reuben went his own way, as he had always done; but the new way, he admitted to himself, rang more crisply underneath than the old had done. Folk were anxious in Garth village to show him that they knew and understood what he had done at Ghyll; they were met by an easy courtesy that was cold as an east wind—a courtesy that halted for a moment to talk of the weather, and then passed by without a wish for friendship. Reuben was plainly minded not to dance to their new tune as yet, and they liked him the better for it.

He had found self-confidence. His father's history, remembrance of that bitter night, when, a lad of fifteen, he had seen Fool Billy and his mother driven out into the wind, had haunted him persistently, had lain always in the background of his thoughts. He had grown used to the belief that his by-name fitted him well enough, that he was infirm of will and must be so to the end. There were no claims upon him, save the farm's; and that claim had been too abstract and impersonal until now to move his fancy.

Now all was changed. Those stark, hot weeks at Ghyll had taught him that he could be needed, desperately needed, by a fellow-being, that he had strength to answer such a call. The knowledge brought no pride with it, only an odd sense of wonder, a return of the old self-doubt as soon as he was home again at Marshlands. He would soon return to his old haphazard life, he told himself. Yet he did not return to it. He needed occupation, change, to take his thoughts away from what had passed at Ghyll; but the

desire for roaming had left him, and he turned instead to the details of his farm.

"'Twill not last," he would think, coming home at nightfall from some journey over the pastures. "But, at the worst, it can do no harm, and keeps me busy."

As the days went by he grew more full of wonder at the change in himself. Little by little the lands, and the smaller of the farms, and his own big house of Marshlands, crept into his heart, as a child might creep to the knee of a lonely man and bring him soft companionship. He had neither wife nor child of his own; and, lacking these, a man's best solace is love of the acres left him by many generations.

It was no 'prentice hand he turned to farming matters, after a' while. The routine of it he knew by training; but the instinct toward it lay deeper than one man's life could ever sound. And the faces of the lazy hinds grew longer day by day, and Michael went whistling about his work.

Oilla, as she returned from her meeting with Gaunt in Raindrift Wood, had been caught by Widow Lister. The widow stood at her door day-long, it seemed, with the sole purpose of snaring heedless wayfarers into her spider's web of gossip.

"Oh, good-day, Miss Oilla," she said briskly. "Ye look lile and bonnie, if a plain cottage-body might say as much without offence. See my bit of a garden here, and how the rain has watered it."

Oilla halted, as all good-natured people did who accepted Widow Lister as a load added by habit to the day's work. She praised the snapdragons, the asters, the marigolds, which, thanks to constant watering through the drought, reared gallant heads to the sunlight. Then she waited, knowing that this was the prelude to some plea for help or to some need for gossip.

"I hear queer news o' Mr. Gaunt these days," said the widow, with a stolen glance at Oilla. "They tell me he's

a changed man, since he was daft enough to step into Ghyll when he hadn't any need to."

"*Man* enough, you meant?" put in Cilla, quietly.

"Ay, well, 'twas like him, any way, to go seeking a spot where trouble was, and then to run his head straight into it—though, of course," she added, with a sigh of demure resignation, "'tis not for me to judge my betters."

Cilla smiled impatiently; it was useless to be angry with this woman, who eluded censure as she had eluded all life's sharp edges. "Then, why judge them, Mrs. Lister?" she asked briskly.

"Oh, I only say what I hear, and I never have faith myself in sudden conversions. When my man was alive, I was almost frightened when he had his serious, sober fits on him—I knew he'd break out worse than ever when he made a fresh start for the Elm Tree Inn. Mr. Gaunt, ye see, is as God made him—and his father's training no way bettered a poor job—and that's where 'tis."

Cilla turned, after a farewell that was colder than her wont, and saw the widow stooping tranquilly above her flower-beds. Mrs. Lister, indeed, seemed the incarnation of peaceful Garth—a trim little figure tending a trim little garden patch that fronted the roadway, with the sun finding auburn streaks in the smooth, well-ordered hair that should have shown a grey patch or two by now. And, in spite of herself, Priscilla smiled again; the widow was so gentle a wasp to look at, and yet her sting was always at Garth's service.

Fever and the dread which had made strong farmer-men ashamed grew half-forgotten by the village as September neared its end. Gaunt still overlooked the work at Marshlands, still wondered that this love o' land grew dearer to him day by day. And sometimes he met Cilla in the fields or on the roadway; and their friendship was quiet and sunny as the light that lay about the hazel copses.

He was often up at Ghyll these days, and Widow Mathewson's smile, when she met him in the doorway, or

saw him coming across the croft, was his reward. She was doing the farm-work alone, stubborn in her pride of isolation. Reuben helped her so far as he could, but he had bigger lands to see to; and one quiet noontide he walked up, with a strapping farm lad at his side.

"Who's this ye've brought, Reuben?" said the widow, standing stiff at her own porch.

"Only a lazy hound I can't lick into shape, mother. Teach him to help you round about the farm, and send him back as soon as you've trained him. He can be spared from Marshlands now, there's less to be done about the fields."

"Nay, now, Reuben—I'm not one to go borrowing—I was never that sort—and I'm used to work."

"The lad has his orders—from me," said Reuben. "See that he does his full share of the work, mother, and a little over."

Mrs. Mathewson, to her surprise, found herself yielding to this new air of Gaunt's, half persuasive and half masterful. Indeed, she was beginning more and more to lean on him, and would tell herself, as she smoked by the hearth at night, that she had earned a little luxury, maybe, in her old age. This morning she was slow to yield. The work was too much for one pair of hands, and she was "bone-weary"; but better work till she dropped than let it be said they needed outside help at Ghyll.

At last she consented grudgingly. "'Tis only a loan o' the lad, mind ye," she hastened to assure him. "I suppose I must hire one soon, like it or no; 'specially now they begin to ask for milk again down i' Garth. They ask in a whisper, though," she added, with her old tart humour. "A shout would bring fever out of its kennel, so they fancy still."

So the farm lad was left at Ghyll; and the look on his face was laughable to watch when Reuben left him to the mercies of Widow Mathewson. The master might be harder these days than of old; but the widow's hardness, and the

strength of her fist to back it if need be, were renowned throughout the dale.

September passed, and still the clear, gold weather made paradise of field and copse. It was now that magic walked across the fella. The dalefolk had seen the mystery in other years, but never as they saw it now; for no man could remember such a spell of drought, and such a fall of rain to follow it.

The pastures, sloping to the blue and amber sky, had been smoking-hot before the rain came; the first day's moisture had been lost, for it was turned to the steam which men had named a ground-mist. The second day's fall had been lapped up greedily, as a cat laps milk; and the third day's, too, had gone to feed the soil. It was only on the fourth day that the streams had begun to brawl and chatter, as if claiming all the mercy of the skies. Like most folk who make noise, the brooks were spreading an empty boast abroad; they were idlers for the most part, dawdling down a fieldway here, a glen there, until some miller stayed their course and bade them turn his wheel for him; but it was the thrifty, working pastures that caught the first-fruits and turned them to good uses.

Gaunt, as he rode about his lands, could see the miracle take shape before his eyes. Sharpnose, away to the south-west, had been as grey-brown as a hazel-nut, withered before it comes to ripeness; now it showed a tinge of green, and each day the green lay deeper, richer, across the burnt-up pastures. He had watched the uprising of the grass in far-off countries when the wet season followed extreme heat, but never yet in Garth.

Yeoman Hirst overtook him one of these days, when both were riding to Shepston Market. "Seem's there's going to be a hay crop, after all, though a lile bit late i' the year," he laughed, pointing at the pastures with his switch. "They say Garth weather's queer, but I never yet made hay at Christmas-time."

"Let's say there'll be good grazing by-and-by, and

that's something to be thankful for, before winter drives the beasts indoors."

Gaunt was shy of his fellow-men, remembering past coldness; but with Oilla's father he was himself. The yeoman's big, hearty outlook on the world inspired confidence in all who met him; his friendship, not to be bought at a price, was counted a privilege; moreover, he was master of the house that sheltered Oilla.

They rode into Shepston together, and stabled at the same inn; and Hirst, before he went about his business, turned to Reuben.

"We might as well jog home in company," he said. "What time d'ye start out for Garth?"

"Four o' the clock, or thereabouts."

"Well, we can meet here, then. I shall have done by that time, and a lonely ride does no man good, they say."

They rode home together through the enchanted land. The dropping sun lay down among clouds that were light as vapour—clouds purple, blue, grey-silver, according to the gloaming's whim; and on the right hand and the left the pastures showed their new-found green, as a mother lifts her baby up for onlookers to praise.

Old tradition told of witchcraft here in Strathgarth Dale. Witchcraft there was, of a kindly sort, and it came from the hills that raked the sky, the hollows that caught the farewell music of the day and softened it, and went unwillingly to bed to dream of fairies' songs. The farmers who lived in amongst this glamour said little about it; they were scarcely conscious that they saw it, for they seldom asked themselves any question that intruded into the day's work; but the beauty of their hills and hollows, the music of their gloaming tides, were as real an influence in their lives as the breath o' God that stirred their acres into life.

"A grand evening," was all Yeoman Hirst found to say.

"Ay, grand," Reuben answered.

They came to the door of Good Intent. "Ye'll step in and drink a cup o' tea?" said Hirst.

Gaunt was taken by surprise. He hesitated, and flushed hotly as he recalled his last visit to Good Intent and the end of it. "Thank you, but I must be getting home," he answered quietly.

The yeoman looked him in the face, and his smile broadened. "Now, Mr. Gaunt, I know what you're thinking of. Bygones are bygones, surely, if we'll let them be. Say I was wrong, if ye like, though I shouldn't like to own to it. Step in, step in!"

Reuben could not fight against this bluff, hearty courtesy. The yeoman whistled a farm hand round to take their horses, then broke into the house with a tread that shook the rafters. Cilla looked up from the table which she was laying ready for tea.

"I've brought a guest wi' me, lile lass," he said, with a genial roar. "He was a bit loth to enter, till I persuaded him he'd find a welcome."

Priscilla was startled, and could not check the sudden flush of pleasure with which she greeted Reuben. All three were silent and ill at ease for a moment. The yeoman, seeing the look that passed between them, wondered if he had done well, after all, to bring Gaunt under his roof.

"The kettle is boiling, father," said Cilla, quietly putting an end to their constraint. "See the crackn: I've baked for you to-day——"

Hirst interrupted her by taking one of the crisp bits of pastry between a thumb and forefinger. "I always had a soft tooth for sweetstuff," he said. "Mr. Gaunt, there's your seat. Cilla, don't be long in mashing the tea; we're a thirsty couple after the ride from Shepston."

When tea was over and they settled round the hearth, Gaunt felt a sense of well-being and content for which there seemed to be no clear reason. So many details went to the making of his comfort—Cilla's face, as she sat half in the firelight, half in the dancing shadows—the yeoman's ready laugh—even the lingering scent of buttered toast which

carried homely memories with it. He had a bigger house at Marshlands, but had never found this fireside glamour there; and always, as they talked, he kept glancing toward Cilla, wondering that so slim a lass could bring such peace about a hearth.

Hirst followed him out when at last he got to saddle. "First visits mean second ones, eh?" he said. "Step in any time ye're passing Good Intent, and good-night to ye, Mr. Gaunt."

He listened to the hoof-beats as they grew fainter up the road; then he went indoors with a sigh, and sat him down in the hooded chair, and beckoned Cilla to his knee.

"We're most of us as big fools as we look, and some of us bigger," he said. "Ye're wondering why I asked Gaunt to the farm? Well, 'twas to pay a debt, if you must have the truth. I've reckoned it up all ways, Cilla, and I've fought agen it, but I like to be just—when I can. I've been hard on the lad, and he went where I wouldn't have gone if I'd been paid in gold for it." His face broke into broad wrinkles, full of charity and humour. "Ye see, lile Cilla, a father's never i' the wrong to his lass—it wouldn't do to own up to it—but when I see Gaunt framing like a farmer, and settling down to the best work God ever put into a man's hands—well, I was not exactly in the wrong, ye understand, but happen I misjudged him, like."

It was pleasant to Cilla, this sitting at her father's knee and listening while the big child's heart of the man found voice. She understood the battle with his pride, the surrender to a finer impulse.

"Not that he's fit for ye——"

"Father, 'tis early days to talk of that," she broke in with sudden fright.

"Ay, and early days are best, if ye want to get your land ready for a good crop to follow. Mind ye, Cilla, I've an old dislike of the man."

"Or of his father?" asked Cilla, shrewdly.

"Well, both, maybe; but I'm talking of to-morrow,

not o' yesterday. I saw the look that passed between ye when Gaunt came in, and I've seen other glances o' the kind. Now, sit ye down, lass. I've earned a fairly plain glimpse o' life, after trying for five-and-fifty year to get a lile bit nearer to it. If ye wed Gaunt, I shall be lone and sorry, but I'll make the best of a bad job."

"Father, cannot you understand that Peggy o' Mathewson's is scarce buried yet?" she murmured, afraid of herself and of all things.

He met her glance frankly, for he had something on his mind, and meant to find speech for it. It was in times of stress that Hirst showed all the common sense and strength that underlay his boisterous good humour.

"Buried is hidden, as they say. Yesterday has lile concern for us, Oilla; but to-morrow has, and that's what I'm telling ye. It's the lesson men have to learn as lads—and women after they've had a bairn or two."

Oilla sat looking into the peat fire. "Well, then, father," she asked by-and-by, "what is it ye want to say?"

"Just this, my lass," said Hirst, blurt'g it out like a school lad. "When I asked Gaunt in, it was because I owed him a debt, like, and wanted to repay it. When I asked him at the door to come a second time, 'twas for a different reason."

"Yes, father?" asked Oilla, still looking at the peats.

"Ye're bound to meet each other, ye two, and I'd rather ye met here instead of in the pastures or the bridleways. I think ye're a fool for your heartache, Cilla, but I'd liefer watch Reuben courting you under my own roof than the sky's."

Oilla flushed, and her voice was piteous. "We've no thought of that kind—father, we're friendly, he and I, and I'm sorry for his trouble—there is no more than that."

"Ay, ye're friendly, and ye're sorry; and I should know by this time, Cilla, what that means between a man and a maid. Get me my pipe, lass, and say good night, and think over what I've said."

Gaunt, meanwhile, rode slowly home to Marshlands. The moon was softening all the outlines of the hills, and owls were calling here and there, making the silence of the land more friendly, if that were needed.

The man was bewildered by the peace of it all—peace of the hearth at Good Intent, with Cilla dainty and her father full of comradeship—peace of the night that was cool and fragrant and at ease. He had stood too near till now to the drought and trouble of the days at Ghyll to meet well-being without distrust. Whenever a cool breeze had met him, with a touch of moisture in it, he had recalled the heat and the naked furnace-sky that had shut the moorland in while Widow Mathewson and he held out against the adversary. Whenever an owl had called he had started, thinking Peggy o' Mathewson's was waking from her fever and needed him in the little upstairs room.

All was changed to-night. The soft, autumn scents were abroad, quiet ghosts that promised immortality to the summer which had seemed to die; the clouds about the moon were light as thistledown; the two at Good Intent, father and daughter, had given him a new hold on life.

He did not know it—men seldom grasp at once these hands reached out to them from the bigger sky above—but he rode down to Marshlands a likelier man to-night, a man more brave to meet the future. All that he could think of, as he slipped from saddle, and gave the reins to a farm lad, and went indoors, was the peace that lay about Good Intent. Cilla's clean, homely daintiness, like lavender; her father's uprightness, and the smell of honest cattle and good horses round about him; the peat-glow stealing ruddy across the yellow candle-light at Good Intent and tricking the grave rows of pewter, china, and delft mugs into a show of warmth; these fireside matters were full of meaning to him.

When he went up to bed, and opened his window to the night, it was the same tale. A starling, roused from sleep,

was whistling a note or two as if getting ready for the spring.

"Silly lad, yond starling," was Reuben's thought. "Thinks he's going to find a mate to-morrow, and then set to work nest-building. Summer's dead, I reckon, and there's a lile, cold snap o' winter to come before he builds his nest."

Outside the house at Marshlands, as Gaunt went to sleep, Billy the Fool watched the darkened windows. He was not homeless, because he had the open air about him, and a bed all ready in the crisp, dry bracken up above. He had no lack of friends; the birds and the four-footed folk saw to that. Yet to-night he was restless and ill-at-ease.

Billy could never "sort out his thoughts, like," as his neighbours said of him; but he could feel, and could remember, and his griefs and joys, because they were instinctive, were poignant and keen.

To-night he did not grudge Gaunt his house, his cosy bed, his riches; he pitied him for such barren wealth. It was Cilla's welfare that troubled him. Whenever he was free of his "play" at the smithy, he had shadowed these two of late, always with the sense that harm might come to Cilla if she were unprotected in Gaunt's company. At the lad's heart to-night, as he stood under Reuben's window, were rage and pity for the scene ended long ago at Marshlands here. He saw Reuben's father send his mother out from the grey porch on his left—the porch whose limestone-white and lichen-grey were limned clearly by the light of the full moon—and he heard her sobs as she leaned against the closed door of the house. He could not disentangle the dead Gaunt from the living, and Reuben was a standing menace, answering for his father's sins.

Fool Billy at this moment was a menace, and one not fanciful at all. He was content to wait till dawn, to watch for Gaunt's coming out from the grey porch. He knew his strength and meant to use it.

A bridle-way ran close to the Marshlands fence, and the

doctor, riding home from a late round, glanced at the moonlit front of the house. He saw Billy the Fool's plump bulk, and from long experience knew that there was danger in the set of the man's figure, his big head lifted to the casement up above.

"Give ye good-e'en, Billy," he said, reining up. "You're growing fond of Reuben Gaunt, it seems."

Billy turned with his accustomed quiet. "Not just fond—rather t' other way, doctor, as a body's body might say."

"Well, then, come catch my stirrup, Billy, and 'twill be play for ye to ride home beside me."

Fool Billy paused, as a dog does when he is divided between pleasure and duty to his master. It was the word "play" that enticed him, as the doctor knew it would. He laughed abroad to the blue-grey face of the moonlight, and vaulted the fence, and clutched a stirrup. The madness had gone from him and left him a child again.

"Well, then," he said—"well, then, doctor—and as a body might say—I was always one for playing."

The exquisite, cool night lay like God's blessing over the Strathgarth lands. And Gaunt, too sound asleep to hear the doctor's voice, or Billy the Fool's slow answer, dreamed quietly of Oilla in her lilac frock—of Oilla, who carried scent o' lilac with her, summer-tide or winter. There was no memory troubled him to-night of Peggy o' Mathewson's and a grave high up on the moor-face which he himself had dug for her; nor would he ever know, unless the doctor lost his habit of keeping his own counsel, how near the shadow of death had come to-night to Marshlands.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE EMPTY WINTER

WIDOW MATHEWSON, up at Ghyll Farm, was prepared to find Reuben's visits grow fewer and fewer, until they ceased altogether.

"Stands to reason," she told herself, with her half-grim, half-humorous outlook upon life—"stands to reason he'll slacken now, when there's no Peggy to 'tice him up the moor. 'Tis no way likely he'd come for the pleasure o' seeing my wry face."

Her judgment was wrong for once. Through the gold September days and the russet glory of October, Reuben snatched every opportunity to ride or walk to Ghyll. He persuaded Mrs. Mathewson to replace his own farm-hind, lent to her and sorely needed now in the busy life at Marshlands, with a steady man-of-all-jobs of his own choosing. He helped her with the ingathering of the bracken. He took pains to set the new man in his place at once, to teach him that his work here was to save the mistress every trouble. All this Gaunt did, and more, though he could ill spare the time; and in between he would steal to the little glen and the rowan tree that sheltered the stream-way and Peggy's grave of peat.

The widow could not read his motive in all this, and he himself at no time attempted to probe into the matter. Remorse for his light parting with the love that Peggy had given him—pity for her end—self-condemnation because he missed her so little, however hard he tried to feel the decency of grief—all played their part in urging him to come often up

to Ghyll. But there was more than this. Those weeks of heat and fever had taught him to see life with clearer eyes, to understand the worth of the affection shown him, in a grim and half-ashamed fashion, by the lonely woman who had nothing else, except her farm, to love.

"Seems I've got a son in my old age," she said drily, when Gaunt had taken some special pains on her behalf one morning of November.

"Shouldn't wonder, mother," he answered cheerily.

"Well, now, there's a daft thing for a tough old woman to be doing. Seems scarce modest, Reuben, almost flighty-like——"

She broke off with a laugh. Her clear, brave eyes were twinkling with mischief, with a spice of that wholesome devilry which no healthy woman loses till her death.

"How does your man-of-all-frayne?" said Gaunt.

"Oh, as well as men ever do—ought to boast of at the best."

"Then I'll give him a piece of my mind before I ride down."

"Nay, that you won't. The lad's well enough, Reuben. His big fault, if I must own to it, is that he willun't let me do my share o' the work. 'Tis all the grand lady he's making me, and I was never reared to idleness. Shall be furnishing a parlour, I, if all this nonsense goes on, and sitting wi' a bit of fancy-work i' my lazy lap, and thinking how many ailments I can have at once, like Widow Lister down at Garth."

Gaunt rode home that day, as on many others, with a pleasant memory of Mrs. Mathewson's laughter, the smoothing of the deeper lines about her face, the power he had of drawing her mind away from griefs buried in a shallow grave.

The luxury of bringing comfort to other folk was growing dearer to him. It had been left to him to find out, unaided, that he had the gift; he had had no help when first he blundered into the knowledge, no help when he

took his first, hesitating steps along the new road. He was stronger now for this lack of aid, and a quiet yet buoyant confidence was replacing his old, haphazard jauntiness.

He was often at Good Intent, when work about the farm was done and he had leisure to stroll down for a pipe with Yeoman Hirst. Oilla would move about the house at these times, doing little needless tasks of setting things to right against the morrow; or she would sit beside the hearth, and intercept grave glances from Reuben—glances which she answered with the same look of question and of hope. It was their waiting time, just as it was waiting time for the frozen pastures of Strathgarth; spring would have to step in before they found the answer to their riddle.

"Gaunt grows shapelier," the yeoman would say, after one of these fireside evenings.

And Oilla would laugh. "He was always shapely enough," she would reply demurely.

"Oh, ay! But I was not thinking o' come-kiss-me-quick shapeliness and moonshine o' that sort. He's showing his true breed at last, and I'm glad. His father—well, he's under sod, and I oughtn't to say it, but he was as near the devil's likeness as I've seen yet. 'Twas a pity, like Oilla, for the Gaunts go back to Norman William, or thereabouts, and there have been few black sheep i' the flock. Now, get to bed wi' your fancies, lass. I've said as much as a cautious man ever dare say i' praise o' wastrel Reuben; but I've seen your daft looks—yours and his across the hearth, all as if there'd never been a couple wanted to wed before—and you must gang your own gait, for Lord help the man that tries to stop ye, slim as ye are."

Exhausted by his eloquence, Hirst would reach out for his mug of ale, and Oilla would go softly up the stair, with shame in her cheeks and peace at her heart. She would lean at the open window, not knowing that the night blew cold, and would see new beauties in the moonlit street, the shadowy fells beyond.

It was to be the bitterest winter known for fifty years in Strathgarth. Yet, when December came, and the frost strengthened its grip, and all the land began to wear a pinched and sullen look, Gaunt felt the warmth of life increase. He lost his dogged recollection of former slights when meeting his neighbours at market or along the highways, just as they had long been willing to admit that their settled judgment of a man might, for once, be wrong. They heard his laugh less often now, but it was heartier when it came, and one they liked to hear. By gradual stages he was settling into his true position as master of the biggest and the oldest farm in Garth.

Hard work was asked of him that winter. Before Christmas there was a three days' snow that drifted over every sheep ungathered from the higher lands. When his own ewes were recovered—and he took more than his share of a labour asking great patience and endurance—he made his way as best he could to Ghyll Farm, getting along by the wall-tops mostly, to see how Widow Mathewson was faring.

He found her helping the man to clear the last fall of snow away from the space between the house-front and the well; her cheeks were ruddy, and her voice rang crisp and almost merry, when she saw Reuben struggling through the croft.

"Bless me; but this has been what parson would call a visitation!" she cried. "'Tis sweeping we've been, and sweeping all over again an hour or two after—we'd have lost our way to the well-spring, if we hadn't. It was kind o' ye to come, Reuben. You'd no easy journey, I reckon, up the moor. It must have been like climbing a feather-bed set on end."

"So it was, mother, when the walls didn't help me; but I'd a fancy you might need me."

"Now, had you?" said the widow, crisply. She was always apt to lose ten years of sorrow when fighting one day's inclement weather. "Because o' my sheep all over-

blown up the moor? Ye should never waste pity, Reuben; there's little enough about, and 'tis precious-like."

"You have them safe, then?"

"Safe? I learned farming while ye were i' your cradle, and that means I learned weather, too; we'd a lile, soft spell o' warmth last week? And ye never dreamed it meant snow to come?"

"I didn't," Gaunt admitted. "I fancied an open spell was coming."

"And you bred i' Strathgarth, and to know so little of her whimsies! That's how she fools ye every winter—a bout o' cold that starves the marrow i' your bones, and then a week o' softness just to 'tice ye on. Oh, I'm old to Strathgarth, lad; and soon as ever the warm snap came, I says to lad Jacob here, 'Jacob,' I says, 'we'll gather the ewes under shelter.' And Jacob, being young, and a man, and a bit daft, says 'No.' And I says 'Yes,' and had to threaten to clout his lugs before he found persuasion. A few folk find religion, Reuben; but 'tis persuasion finds the many."

Jacob, the man-of-all-jobs, had been standing discreetly in the rear. The bravest folk had a trick of standing out of the widow's reach. And suddenly he gave a great, loutish laugh.

"'Tis this way, Mr. Gaunt," he explained, with some show of haste. "Couldn't help laughing, I. You told me, first you found me a job here, I was to look after missus. Well, durned if I haven't a fancy, like, that the boot's on i' other leg. *She's looking after me*, and I can't help myself. But she's good at the weather, she is, I own," he added reflectively. "She's saved me a lot o' trouble, all through ingathering them ewes before she'd right or sense in thinking it was going to snow."

"There's the shippin to be cleared, soon as ye've done idling wi' your broom, Jacob," said the widow. "Ye'll take cold in this weather, lad, if ye don't bustle about a bit."

Jacob slouched off shamefacedly ; and Mrs. Mathewson, as she made Gaunt welcome in the living-room, surprised him by her cheeriness. It was only when he stood at the porch, to find his way down the moor again—through hazard of the snow-drifts, as he had come—that the widow reached out to him for help. She had gathered in her sheep ; she was wise enough to know the look of the sky and the way of a Strathgarth winter ; but she was lonely and forlorn, for all that.

"Reuben," she said, gently, "the snow's three feet or more over Peggy's grave. It has drifted into the little glen, and the rowan tree's half hidden. I can't thole the thought o' my lass lying up yonder i' the cold."

"Snow covers warm, mother, so they say."

"Ay, so they say ; but I can't believe it when I see the glen. I could bear it better when the days were soft and pleasant, and maybe a throistle whistling i' the rowan, or a starling plucking at the berries just ower Peggy's head ; it seemed friendly, like. Reuben, I was never one for prayer," she broke off, with sudden passion, "but I tell ye I've worn my knees raw with asking God to give me back my lass. There was no answer ; stands to reason there couldn't be. One silly old woman bleating like a ewe that's lost her lamb—bleating right up into the big, empty sky, Reuben, and thinking she'd get an answer. 'Twould be enough to make me laugh, if I didn't cry instead."

Gaunt was dismayed by this glimpse allowed him of the strong, tireless tragedy underlying the woman's mask of tartness and half-humorous self-control. The widow, seeing his trouble, passed a hand across her eyes ; and her smile was like a break of sunshine that can brighten the wintry fields, but not thaw them.

"There, to be sure, 'tis outrageous for a tough old bit of bogthorn like me to be reckoning to have feelings o' my own. Why, 'tis near as foolish as to find a son i' my old age—a son already made, so to say, like Moses in the bulrushes. Ye'd best be getting down the moor, for it wouldn't

do to let dark overtake ye. Good-bye, Reuben; ye're a good lad to me these days."

She left him abruptly to have her cry out indoors and get done with it. Gaunt watched her out of sight, then turned the shoulder of the farmstead and made his way, not down but up the moor. The track to Peggy's grave was marked plainly by Widow Mathewson's big, man-like boots.

There was something strangely sad and lonely in this path of sorrow, in the look of the regular, deep footprints, limned sharply, even to the impress of the nails, by the bitter, east-wind frost. There was something lonelier still in the look of the glen above, which now lay almost level with the moor. The upper branches of the rowan were all that broke the white, unending spaces, reaching out to a grey-black sky that showed dirty by contrast with the virgin white beneath.

Gaunt understood how hard it was to believe the country saying that "Snow covers warm." An incongruous memory came to him of the evening, little more than four months ago, when Peggy and he had crossed from Linsall Fair, and had been glad of the rowan's shelter, the cool tinkle-tinkle of the stream, after the parched heat of the uplands. He saw the girl's look of splendid vigour and high spirits, the light in her eyes, as he stooped to kiss her, and she reached up her lips with reckless zest in life and laughed, "Yes, Reuben—with a will and a half—if only because you won the fell-race to-day." He could see the red scarf at her breast, setting off, as she knew well enough, her gypsy beauty. He could feel his heart beat with eagerness as he asked her to marry him, thinking, in the moment's over-mastering passion, that he could be faithful to any but Priscilla of the Good Intent.

And this was the end of it all. The stream was frozen down to the pebbles that lined its bed; three feet of snow lay over the spot where they had kissed in the cool of a summer's evening; and Peggy—Peggy, with her gypsy

eyes, and her flaunting, crimson scarf, and her wild, unstinting love for him—lay under a shroud of the moor's making.

There comes an end to a man's power to feel further grief at these times of a martyrdom self-imposed. The wise God has seen to that. Reuben turned at last, his shoulders bent, and went down the track which Peggy's mother had made for him. Then he made his way home, as he had come, along the wall-tops, or across the higher spurs of land which the wind had cleared, or by any way that served. His housekeeper, when he came into the house at dusk, said to herself that he looked a broken man, and wondered at the cause.

As for Reuben, he was no way broken. The fierce, cold wind—of remorse and grief for others—had bent him level with the ground, but could not break him; for a strong man's character is apt to ride high, as the stars do, above the moment's weather. To-morrow he would take up his work, with a still firmer hand, may be, than before; to-morrow he would find his way again to Ghyll, enticed there by a face not young at all, a face on which grief and weather between them had traced strange patterns. There was real tenderness at the heart of this man who had shown so many faces to the world, and Widow Mathewson had chosen a good son, after all, on whom to lean.

At dusk of the same day, as Gaunt was dragging his tired feet through the drift that lay between the road and his own garden fence, the evening mail came into Garth. Instead of three horses, there were four, and they were sending clouds of steam down the tracks of the frosty wind. The driver pulled up at the cottage which served Garth as post-office and shop-of-all-trades. His hands were frozen stiff as the beads of foam on the harness, but his laugh was warm as ever when Daniel, the post-master, came out from selling a pen'north of toffee to receive Her Majesty's mail.

"Not snowed up yet?" asked Daniel, shivering a little in the wind.

"No! No, Daniel. Not just yet. You're the ninety-and-ninth that has asked me that question along the road, and I'm fair tired of answering. We've kept a way open somehow, but durned if we can hold out against another fall. Gee-up, hosses! Your hoofs are balled under with snow, and my hands and feet are as cold as a jilted lass, but Her Majesty wouldn't like us to be much later than we are already. *Gee-up, hosses.*

His cattle were getting fairly under weigh by the time he reached Widow Lister's door. He had hoped, for once, to escape the plump little woman whose only business in life was to hold up busy men on the highway; yet he pulled up, with weary deference to habit, as he saw her lying in wait.

"So you're not snowed up yet?" she asked.

Her slanting glance, over-coy for her years, the sleek, well-fed look of the woman, found the secret corner where the driver kept his temper hidden.

"You're the hundredth," he snapped, "and I knew I'd find the last straw at your door, or thereabouts. Seems to me you keep a stack of suchlike straws. What is it, widow? We're late, and Captain is as cross as ever I saw a horse in my long time of driving."

"Nay, 'tis Captain's master that's cross. Shame on ye, to be grumbling at such weather as God sends. Who are we to grumble?"

He waited in mute exasperation. The widow was "nimble as a weathercock"—as he put it to himself—"and could always place a right-thinking man in the wrong." She had every trick at command when defence was needed of her snug self-complacency.

"What is it?" he repeated.

"Oh, now, don't be getting impatient! I only asked if ye were snowed up or not. Surely a civil body can ask a civil question."

"Well, I shouldn't be here if I was; but to-morrow," he added, with cheerful malice, "there's no doubt the mail

can never run. I doubt, as it is, if I can get as far as Keta's Wall to-night. The drifts are six foot high up the road, so they tell me."

"There, now! If ever I want a thing, and must have it, there's sure to be a cross. Ay, just another cross. Widows, living lonely-like and helpless, were meant to bear 'em, I reckon. I was going to ask you to bring——"

For the first time in the driver's history, he did not wait for a wayside command. His feet and hands were frozen; that mattered little; but his horses were in risk of catching a chill.

"*Gee-up, Captain,*" he said. "I'll bring it—bird-cage, or eight-day clock, or what not, widow—when the weather's a shade milder."

Cilla heard the running shuffle of hoofs on frozen snow as the mail went past Good Intent. She was sitting in the firelight, and Hirst, just returned from bringing sheep down to the fold, was dozing by the hearth.

"There's the mail, father. 'Tis time we had a letter between us, surely."

"Eh, lile lass?" he asked, rousing himself, as he always did, at the sound of Cilla's voice.

"The mail has just passed. I was thinking a letter of some kind would be welcome."

"Would it, now? I could have understood that better if—well, if somebody had been away fro' Garth instead of biding at home."

Cilla winced under her father's jovial pleasantry. She knew that he referred to Gaunt, and during these days of waiting and uncertainty she was sensitive to the least hint that they were free to care for each other. Like Reuben himself, she thought of the grave away up the moor; stray gusts of tenderness would blow aside the memory in unguarded moments, and she would check herself as if committing sacrilege.

"Oh, it is only that news from outside is pleasant, father, when the snow shuts us in for so long together."

"Well, ye've got your wish," said Hirst, rising lazily, as a knock sounded by-and-by on the outer door of the porch. "That's Harry the Post, if I know a knock when I hear it."

Cilla waited with a pleasant feeling of expectancy as her father opened the door.

"Evening!" came Harry's gruff voice. "Just a lile letter fro' Canada—'twill be from David, as I said to myself soon as ever I saw the writing and the mark. I'll step in, after my round's finished, and hear what news he gives ye."

This easy handling of the mail's privacy was one of Garth's usual customs, and Hirst assented. "Ay, step in, Harry. News and a cup o' summat warm—ye'll need it, with all the snow ye've got to trudge through."

"All i' the year's work! I'll be glad to hear news o' David, I own. As I says to Daniel just now, while sorting my mail, it's a terrible daft thing, to think of a steady, straight-set-up Garth man choosing to waste his time in them furrin parts. Garth's good enough for me, though plague take her weather. Well, I must be trudging."

Cilla was standing at the table, a puzzled frown on her face. She scarcely heard Harry the Post's chatter. The wished-for letter had come; it happened to be from David, and her only feeling was one of indifference. It had been otherwise not many months since, in the early weeks of her shame and loneliness. After bidding Reuben keep faith with Peggy o' Mathewson's, she had welcomed the first letter from Canada, had read and re-read it, had taken courage from the strength underlying David's crude sentences and simple penmanship. She had needed him then. And now——

"Art in a day-dream, lass?" roared Hirst, tearing the letter open as he came in again. "Here's news from an old friend of yours. Sit down by the hearth, Cilla, and let's see what's doing out beyond."

Hirst read the scrawled pages with some difficulty, laid them down on the settle, and glanced across at Cilla.

"There's news with a vengeance. David's coming home i' the spring."

"So soon?" asked Cilla, with sudden disquiet. "It seems a far journey for such a short stay."

"So he thinks, too. He's never what you would call bitter, isn't lad David, but he comes near to it this time. His aunt Joanna, it seems, has found a man to her liking, and is going to be wed before long. She wants David about her till the wedding-day—trust Joanna for that—but not a minute later. The only thing David finds pleasant in the business is his longing to be home in Garth again.

Cilla's interest was roused, as it always was by injustice. "But, father, she might have thought of that before sending in such haste for David. It was not as if she asked him to step across to the next parish. He left his work here, to——"

"But Joanna never did think, save for herself. Bless me, I can see her smile, and her easeful way of asking other folk to do her work—just such another as Widow Lister. You can't argue about such women, Cilla; you can only laugh, as you would at a baby. So David's coming home! Well, 'tis good news, say I. What say ye, Cilla?" he added, with a shrewd glance across the hearth.

"Of course, father; who would not be glad to see him again? He's so kind and steady, and ready to help everybody foolishly."

"Just so," said the yeoman, with a laugh that was half a sigh. "He's all that never in this world could tempt a lass. Male-birds should wear brighter colours, eh? Read what he says there," he added, reaching out for the letter and putting his finger on the scrawled postscript.

Cilla read the few words, then sat with the letter in her lap. The message was so brief, so clumsy in its dumb appeal; yet it brought a sudden rush of tears to the girl's eyes.

"Tell Cilla"—she could almost hear the man's slow voice speaking to her from away in Canada—"tell Cilla I've seen a deal that she used to want to see; what she called

'all beyond Garth hills.' I can tell her about strange lands now, if I can bring my slow tongue to it. Maybe she'll find me polished up a bit—not just so sleepy-like—and any way, if she's free, it stands to sense I haven't changed, any more than I've altered in my wish to see Garth again."

That was all; but the message brought many memories to Priscilla. It painted for her every joy and heartache, each bewilderment that had followed Reuben Gaunt's return to Garth last spring. She remembered how Reuben had first caught her fancy by talk of "all beyond Garth hills"; she recalled David's dogged persistence in his faith that the old homeland was better than the new countries he had never seen, his jealousy of Gaunt's glib speech and wider experience. So much had been possible to David then; if only he had known it; he could have pitted his strength and sturdiness against the other's debonair persuasiveness; he might have appealed to the trust and comradeship that had held between them since the days when she was a lass in pinafores, and David a hulking lad of twenty who had eyes for no one else.

Yet Cilla knew that it could never have been. In some instinctive way, without thinking it in so many words, she knew that David the Smith was not meant to have a wife of his own, and—and all that followed, if God willed it. Looking into the sleepy peat-glow, she sat aloof for a moment from her own perplexities. She saw David clearly, as we seldom find opportunity or leisure to view our neighbours—saw him with the grey, soft light of renunciation about him. It was David who had made Billy the Fool a working member of the busy hive at Garth, simply by persuading him that work was play. It was David who had mended Widow Lister's clocks, and bird-cages, and window-fasteners, long after the patience of other men had been exhausted. It was David, who loved Garth, and all Garth's ways, and all Garth's frets and whimsies, who had gone overseas to help a kinswoman in fanciful distress.

Cilla turned to the letter, and read the postscript again ; and she was surprised when her father, rising with great noise from the hooded chair opposite, told her she was crying. He patted her roughly on the head, as if she were a sheep-dog, and stamped up and down the room, and returned to ask her what was the matter.

"Nothing, father ; nothing. I'm tired of this snow, maybe——"

"Well, then, I'll just go out and tell Garth folk that David's coming back. They'll like to hear it," said Hirst, who, like all men, had a secret cupboard where he hid his one favourite cowardice. "Could never abide tears myself, like Cilla. Live and let live, I always did say. Men were made for work, and they'd best leave women alone when tears are brewing up."

Widow Lister was patrolling her door-front when he went by. "There's luck for a body," muttered Hirst, ruefully, as he caught sight of the plump little figure. "Enjoying a walk i' the snow?" he asked as he went by. "Well, I've had enough of it myself, trapesing all up and down the pastures since dawn."

"A lone body must do something," answered the widow, plaintively. "I get weary-like o' my thoughts, sitting wi' the firelight only for company."

"I dare say, I dare say!" assented Hirst, his big, foolish heart melted at once by this deftly-suggested picture of the lonely hearth. "Cilla must come in oftener to chat wi' ye at nights."

"Or perhaps ye'd find time now and then to step in yourself?" murmured the other, her eyes lifted "kitten-soft" to his in the moonlight. "There's something in the way a man sits in his chair, and the smell of his pipe-smoke, that's cheering to a body."

Hirst was as free of vanity as most hearty, well-set-up men, but he had felt more than one doubt of the widow's friendliness in years gone by ; and to-night he took a half-step or two away from her, like a bird that sees the snare

being set. "Why, yes," he roared. "To be sure, I'll step in some night, and bring Oilla with me—and bring Oilla with me. Ye'll have David the Smith back in Garth, too, with the spring."

"I'm glad of that," said the widow. "There's that little job still waiting to be done—and it's rankled a bit, as I told ye—and now I can give him a piece o' my mind."

"Humph!" growled Hirst, as he moved down the street. "Good night to ye. I'd thought ye might like to see David back for his own sake, not for what he can do for ye."

As he neared the forge a broad shaft of crimson lay across the blue-white, moonlit road—a vivid splash of colour that flickered in long, waving lines.

"So Billy's at play. Never knew such a lad for playing early and playing late. He'll be fain o' my news, I reckon," thought Hirst, as he moved to the smithy door and stood looking in.

Dan Foster's lad was busy at the bellows, and Fool Billy was standing at his anvil. He looked a huge, heroic figure as he brought the hammer down, his arms thick and brawny, his head throwing a fantastic shadow of itself on the wall behind. A cheerful scent came from within the forge; an odour made up of red-hot iron, and fire-heat, and hoof-parings from recent shoeing. The yeoman would know that smell of Garth forge, bringing memories of the old days with it, if you set him blindfold after years of absence at the door. The contrast, too, between the nipping frost one side the threshold, the royal warmth on the other, was pleasant, like a spring day found unexpectedly at Christmas-tide.

"Billy, my lad, David comes back with the spring," said Hirst, his natural voice striking easily across the uproar of the bellows and the anvil.

Fool Billy, as befitted one who was short of wit, went on with the work in hand and finished it before he turned

about. He was none of your wise fellows who drop a tool at the first hint of gossip, and afterwards return reluctantly to the unfinished job.

"Te-he! There'll be terrible pranksome doings when David comes back," he said, leaning on his hammer. "He's like the swallows, in a manner o' speaking, this same man David; off for the winter, and home when Garth has got nicely warmed up again. When will he be coming, like? The first swallow's nest last year began a-building just when the ousel hatched out her clutch of five up in Winnybrook Wood. Seems a long while to wait," he added, glancing at the ribbon of firelit snow across the highway.

"Oh, 'twill soon pass. Time does for busy folk," said Hirst, warming his hands at the smithy fire, and thinking, with some compunction, of the daughter he had left at Good Intent "to have her cry out, like."

Billy was silent for awhile, his massiveness and air of detachment from the world suggesting some impersonal figure of destiny. Then suddenly, as his way was, he returned to extreme childishness.

"David will be bringing a lile pipeful o' baccy; and, if he can no way find a match, I've got the fire to light it at right soon."

The yeoman laughed—rattling the horseshoes on the walls—and handed his pouch to Billy. When the clay pipe was loaded, and quiet puffs of smoke were going up to the blackened rafter-beams, Billy laughed foolishly.

"Seems I'm in a terrible puzzlement, like a hen with an addled egg."

"Are ye, now—and why?"

"Well, soon as ever David comes back with the swallows, blessed if he won't want a daft body to go working all at bellows-blowing. Look at Dan Foster's lad, and say by yond same token if bellows-blowing isn't work."

Foster's lad was wiping the sweat from his forehead,

and he grinned at them both with friendly acquiescence in Billy's logic.

"That's soon put right," said Hirst. "What's work i' winter, Billy, is play when spring comes in."

The fool smoked the matter over with tranquil disregard of time. "I believe ye," he said at last. "Have watched the birds to some purpose, I. They'll be hopping i' search o' crumbs all winter-time, as lean as a bare-boughed tree; but see 'em in spring—see 'em in spring, wi' the gloss on their wings, and their bonnie, bright eyes, and their calls when they're all by way o' mating—ye'd scarce know which was work, or which was play, to these same scatter-wits. So David's coming swallow-fashion home, is he, to make me play at bellows-blowing? I'll be glad to see the man's right, proper face again, I own."

Oilla was still sitting by the hearth at Good Intent, and was still thinking of David's letter, of the postscript which she understood so well. She was aware of a childish wonder that the message should have reached her with all its freshness after so long a sea voyage. The man's unswerving loyalty, his dumb acceptance of any treatment she might give him, brought a pang of real suffering to Priscilla. She had no weight of remorse to battle with, as Gaunt had when he thought of the moorland grave; and yet, in spite of logic, she blamed herself. Overstrung as she was to-night, she could picture David's return, the pathetic hopefulness that his new power of talking about foreign lands would bring him nearer to his desire, his ignorance that there was any bond between herself and Reuben Gaunt.

"But, then, there is none," she would finish weakly, and would find little comfort in the thought. And the tears would fill her eyes once more, because David was so constant, and she so weak to help him.

Oilla of the Good Intent stood in the middle of her own winter-tide, just as Garth village did; and the spring, as Billy the Fool had said, seemed long in coming.

CHAPTER XXIV

SPRING I' THE LAND

THERE's no resisting Strathgarth Dale when her true spring arrives. She has many ambushes, many a sportive deceit, between winter and the breaking of the leaf-buds. It will please her mood to let woodbine leaf in March, to throw a wealth of saffron sunlight into sheltered corners of the fields, so that a man may sit and bask, and tell himself—knowing it a pleasant self-deceit, if he be bred in Strathgarth—that spring this year is coming early and is staying late. The next day a north-west gale will bring sleet and snow with it, and farmers have to trudge in search of ewes that have been daft enough to trust the weather and to drop lambs about the pastures. And so through April—and half of May, perhaps—the weather teases folk, till their tempers grow brittle, and they hint darkly that it is a fool's job to go on living in such bleak lands.

Then suddenly the real spring comes, and the warm, keen joy of it, the eagerness of nesting birds and growing greenstuff, sweep memory of the winter's bitterness away. It is spring and summer in one, this wonder-season that takes hold of Strathgarth Dale. The cattle, from sheer lust of life and liberty, throw foolish heads abroad and chase each other up and down the primrose pastures. Stern men unbend, and usual, frail people grow frolicsome. It is sure, at this season of the leafing trees, that there's no place else in which to live save the long dale of Garth.

On one of these days Gaunt walked up to Ghyll Farm. All up the fields the cowslips curtsied to him, or primroses

ventured maidish glances from their nooks. The larks rose high, and sang of courage and well-being. The plovers moved sedately, two by two, about the fields, and pretended, each pair of them, that the world did not know them at sight for nesting-mates. A score of unconsidered flowers were budding eagerly.

Reuben found Widow Mathewson at the gate of the croft, as if she looked for him.

"I somehow fancied ye'd come, Reuben," she said, with as pleasant a glance of trust and welcome as though she were forty years younger, and he a lover bustling up with spring glamour in his eyes.

"Well, it was this way, mother. You told me your man was to be off for a day's holiday, and I thought there might be an odd job here and there——"

"Just so," put in the other, with a quiet laugh of content. "That's why I knew ye'd be stepping up the fields."

There was a good deal to be done, as it chanced, and it was evening before all was finished. After they had supped together, Mrs. Mathewson led Reuben out into the croft and turned toward the moor.

"We might as well enjoy the cool o' the day, now we've earned it," she said.

Reuben glanced at her inquiringly. Her voice was gentler than he had known it; her shrewd, grey eyes were soft and kindly as they met his own. It seemed that spring had touched her weather-beaten life with fingers light and tender.

She was taking the track to Peggy's grave, for all that; and Gaunt wondered why she chose just this one way to-night.

"Oh, I laugh often at you folk who live smothered down in the valley yonder," said the widow, turning for a glance at the dipping moor, the green pastures, the hills whose jagged tops were ruddy with the after-glow. "When 'tis cold, you're colder than us; when 'tis hot, ye've never a

breath o' clean moor air to cool ye. I'd have died o' my troubles long since, Reuben, if it hadn't been for the moor."

With curious tenderness she pointed out to him the landmarks, and named them all. Behind that spur of hill lay Dene hamlet. Just under the pole-star, showing bright in a green-blue strip of sky, stood the little farm where she had lived as a lass when Mathewson came courting her. The points of the compass were so many guides to memory—to memory, which is all the old folk have to warm them when spring calls up the pastures and demands an answer to his insolent young note.

She almost forgot her errand in this love she had for the moor and its girdling hills. There was a story to tell of Heyward's lass, who lived just where the pine-wood showed dark below them in the evening light—of Daft Will, who lived under Sharprise yonder, and was the wildest and friendliest squire who ever rode the Strathgarth bridle-ways—of Bachelor Royd, who always said that he'd never cared to buy a wife by flattery, because pigs were easier come by and more profitable at the cost of open bargain in the market.

And then she turned to him, still with the smile that smoothed out so many furrows from her tired old face.

"All this is old wives' talk," she said. "I was always a lile bit daft, like poor Peggy, but it heartens me to talk now and again o' days gone by. Maybe they'd their own share of crosses and whimsies, yond old times—but they have a trick o' smelling sweeter than the new days, Reuben."

She grew silent when they reached the glen, but the peace did not leave her face. It was a pleasant bed, she felt, they had made for Peggy here, now that the snow and the east wind had gone and the stream was free to sing its litanies. The rowan was in its first leaf, rippling under the least touch of the breeze; from the moor came the strong, eager scent of ling and greening bilberry; above them the

stars showed one by one, while all along the western rises a wisp of after-glow lay like a saffron mantle over the sleepy hill-tops.

"Reuben," she said by-and-by, "I want to talk to ye, and I fancied we could best find words up here. You'll need a mistress soon for Marshlands."

Well as Gaunt knew her liking for abrupt, plain speech, he was startled. His thoughts had been all of the past year's heedlessness and tragedy; he could not rid himself of the figure that seemed to stand beside the grave—a radiant ghost, with gypsy eyes and straight, lithe figure, and a crimson kerchief knotted at the breast. There was no looking forward here, where the wind and the sky were quiet and the still moor watched its dead.

"Nay, not that look, Reuben!" said Mrs. Mathewson, laying a gentle hand on his arm. "I never was one for back-reckonings. It's all well enough, while the grief's on ye, to look behind; but there comes a time to look forward."

"It was only last autumn she died, mother."

"Just so, but there's been fire and torment for you in between—oh, I know, Reuben! and the clock ticks very slow at such times. Would ye listen once in a way while I talk to ye? There's decency i' grief; and, after that, there's a man's need to look at the track ahead. We're here for this world's business, Reuben, till we die."

He was looking at her with a puzzled question in his eyes, as if she had roused him from some nightmare and was telling him that the light of day was sweeping through the windows of his prison.

"After we die," went on the other—"well, Peggy's wiser than me by now, for I've no notion o' what happens afterward. We live on, I reckon; though Mathewson, being fond o' sleep at all times, would have it that we never do wake up again. I used to tell him that I came of a wiry stock, and knew we were meant, like, to live on—in some sort o' heaven, may be, seeing what a lot of t'other place we get i' this life."

There was something clean and vigorous, like a wind from the heath, in this woman's outlook on the life that harassed her, on the life that was to come. If her faith lay deep and hard to find, her fearlessness and honesty had in them the same massive power that underlay Fool Billy's oddities.

Unconsciously Gaunt yielded to her mood. He had spent himself generously to serve this late-found mother, and it was her turn now to stretch a helping hand to him.

Out of the quiet night, the fragrant moor, there came a quickened sense of motherhood to the woman. Spring leads the younger folk down paths where the valleys shelter primroses and nesting birds; it leads the old to the higher tracks where the sky and the moor-winds talk of abnegation.

"Reuben, my lad," she said, her harsh voice softened to the lilt of the heather-breeze, "Reuben, you're too full o' life to live lonely for Peggy's sake. There's Marshlands, too. Have ye never thought that ye needed a son to follow you? Of course you have!"

"Yes," Reuben answered gravely. "Yes, I had thought of that."

"Why, Mathewson was a weakly man enough, but he never did forgive me for bringing a life lass into the world instead of a lad; and I always sort o' respected him for it, somehow. Stands to sense, Reuben, it's the man's way to want a boy or two, to carry the old name and the old house on. It's i' the blood, and it goes deeper than any kiss-i'-the-coppice love o' women. Oh, I'm old, and I know, and I'm telling ye!" she finished, relapsing into her favourite phrase.

There was pluck in this quiet persuasiveness of the widow's. She had been fiercely jealous on Peggy's behalf, though her girl was long past all feeling of the kind. It had hurt her when now and then she had seen Gaunt and Oilla together in Garth-street, or in the fields, and had read their secret more plainly than they did themselves. Only by hard endeavour, by grasping her love for Reuben

and bringing her sturdy commor sense to bear upon his welfare, had she found courage for this talk at Peggy's graveside.

"Besides," she added, after a silence, "it was always Miss Good Intent." For the first time a touch of the old bitterness was in her voice. "What did I tell ye long ago, Reuben? Ye need a ladyish mistress for Marshlands—'specially now ye're bringing the place into its old shape again. I'll not complain, lad; and, as for Peggy, she lies very quiet, and she won't speak a word."

"We must wait, mother—wait and see what happens afterwards," said Reuben, gravely. "We'll not talk of it to-night."

The bitterness left her, and she came nearer and laid a hand on his arm. "Life doesn't wait. 'Tis only death can spare time for that. Just tell yourself old scores are settled handsomely, Reuben, and find yourself a mate."

The starshine and the silence of the moor wrapped the two of them about, as a nurse draws the coverlet across tired children. The fever-heat of August, the misery and fear, were softened, till they seemed—to Gaunt, if not to the widow—part of a tragedy much further off in point of time.

A curlew came straying down the moor, and wheeled and cried about the rowan tree.

"Hark ye," said Mrs. Mathewson, "there's Peggy's parson come to say a prayer or two above her. He's constant, like, yond bird—she had him so tame, ye'll mind, that he'd almost eat from her hand—and he never went south this winter, like most of his mates. He just comes drifting down each night, like a lost bairn seeking home, and says his prayers, and then goes lap-winging up the moor again. There, we'll be getting back, Reuben. 'Tis a grand night for two together, if they happen to be spring-time young; but you'll be tired of an old woman's chatter by this time."

When they reached the porch, Gaunt stooped and kissed her awkwardly. Such tokens were rare between them, and

his feeling was always one of shyness, as if he feared reproof.

"You've been kind to me to-night, mother," he said.

"Well, I've a right to be. Take a breath o' common sense down from the moor to the valley-lands, and quit thinking o' last year's nests. Good-night, Reuben. I'm fancying like Miss Cilla will not choose so far wide o' the mark, after all."

She stood at the porch door long after he had gone. She was jealous no longer on Peggy's behalf. A great weariness had come to her—tiredness of all things under this warm, soft sky, with its stars and its silent peace. She had paid her debt to Gaunt. Her knowledge of all he had done for her, when none but he came up to help her through the fever time, had stood to Widow Mathewson as a debt, and she had always had a liking for meeting creditors.

Peggy lay under the rowan, with the quiet of the curlew's evensong above her. Reuben was striding down the fields, lusty and long-to-live. But this woman, standing at the porch, was empty of all courage.

"Spring blows warm to the young," was her thought. "'Tis only right it should—but what of the old, sapless folk?"

She sighed, and laughed at herself the next moment, and answered her own question.

"Not so sapless, after all," she said in her brisk, tart voice as she turned indoors. "There's a farm to look after, and a lazy hind to get up betimes to-morrow's morn."

Gaunt, meanwhile, had got down the fields as far as the footbridge that decides a man whether he shall cross to Garth or turn to the right and seek the road which leads Marshlands way. Gaunt chose the left-hand track, over the slender arch of stone.

"I'll go by way o' Garth," he said to himself. "The longest way round is pleasant on a night like this."

The longest way round led him past Good Intent, and a big voice sounded from the porch as he neared it.

"Ye'll have a rare fine day for your journey, Cilla," Hirst was saying—taking all the parish into his confidence, though he thought his tone subdued. "I never saw a likelier sundown."

Gaunt stopped. A senseless lover's dread had seized him. Cilla going a journey? Had his hopes been so much idleness? A journey meant travelling over-seas, surely—and David was in Canada—and there had always been a friendship between them.

"Yes, father," he heard Cilla answer. "You are fond of telling me I've luck o' the weather when I take a journey."

Gaunt moved forward. The girl's tone was so quietly happy that he was sure now of his hasty guess. David was on his way home, so he had understood; but perhaps he had changed his mind at the last moment, had found a profitable farm out yonder, and Cilla was going out to him. He remembered her longing, a year ago, to see what lay beyond Garth hills; it was bitter to recall how eagerly he had prompted her restlessness, had talked of other countries until at last he caught her fancy. And now she was going out to marry David, and it would be the slow-going smith who showed her the strange lands.

The dim, white road seemed to be slipping away from under Gaunt's feet. He no longer wished to stay for a chat at Good Intent; his one desire was to get away with his misery and conquer it as best he might.

The yeoman checked him. He and Cilla were sitting on the stone bench just inside the porch, as they had sat for last hour. It was dusk along the highway, but the porch was darker still, and Hirst, looking out from its shelter, could not mistake the figure striding by so quickly.

"What have we done, then, Mr. Gaunt, that you're i' such a hurry to get past the door?" roared Hirst.

Gaunt laughed, with a constraint that puzzled Cilla.

"Well, I've called so often lately that I fancied my welcome might be over-stayed."

"Hear him, Cilla! As though every man in the dales didn't know our ways. There's two sort o' folk, Mr. Gaunt. One sort would never set foot over my doorstep, if I could help it. T'other sort can come, dawn, or dusk, or middle-day, and as often as they please. Now, step forrard. Cilla, we've been idling in the dark here long enough. Light up indoors, lass, and stir the peats, and set a couple o' glasses out."

When they followed Cilla in, and stood in the lamp-glow, Reuben looked across at her. "You are going a journey to-morrow," he asked abruptly.

She did not meet his glance, but stooped to play with the kitten on the hearth. He saw the delicate colour come and go across her cheeks, as it did always when her feelings were touched in any way; and again he guessed that David was the cause.

"Yes, I am going—to Keta's well," she finished unexpectedly.

One little, upward look she gave him, then went on playing with the kitten. The glance was so full of question, so quiet and yet so near to roguishness, that it bewildered Gaunt. Gradually he felt the ground grow firm under his feet again, as he realized that it was not David the Smith, after all, who had tempted her to make a journey. And suddenly he laughed.

"Well, now, durned if I know why you're laughing," said Hirst. "Cilla tells ye she's going up to Keta's Well, as she goes every spring, to do a few lile oddments o' business for me, and ye seem to fancy it a jest."

"So it is," said Reuben; "the best I've heard for many a day. It was the notion of Miss Cilla doing business for you that tickled me, somehow," he added hurriedly, seeing the yeoman's half-puzzled, half-quizzical glance at him.

"'Tis spring has gone to your head, my lad. That's

what it is. I was like that myself when I was your age. I could laugh at the first idle thought, or at none at all, soon as ever I heard the cock throstle whistling to the hen-bird, or saw the first o' the green dappling every hedgerow. Eh, lad," he broke off, reaching for his pipe, "I'd swop my time o' life for yours, if you'd let me. But, then, ye wouldn't. You're no fool, eh?"

When Reuben said good-night, no whisper passed between Cilla and himself; but she set out the lilac frock before she got to bed and smoothed the folds as if it were a living thing, dear to her from old acquaintance. And in her heart she knew that Gaunt would see it on the morrow.

The dawn, when it came cool and fragrant through her open window, found Cilla half awake already. She had dreamed of Ghyll Farm, of fever, of penance and disaster; it was good to wake to this clean, real life that called to her from out-of-doors.

She did her work about the house, gave Yeoman Hirst his breakfast, then went up to don the lilac gown.

"Too bonnie to be good," said Widow Lister, as she watched Cilla pass her door a half-hour later. "When we're made for sorrow, and should be humble-like in face o' death to come, 'tis tempting Providence to wear such a becoming shade o' lilac."

Cilla went down the street, radiant like the spring, with some happiness that came from within. She was eager, buoyant, and she moved along the grey, old high-road like some tall fairy who had forgotten that the world was tired and hum-drum.

Will the Driver came rattling up to the Elm Tree Inn, guiding his team of three, and greeted Cilla with the pleasant air of welcome that she commanded at all times.

"Bless me, but you've a trick o' tempting summer out from frosty corners," he laughed. "You'll be for Keta's Well? I always did say there's one day that's better than

the rest—and that's when I carry Miss Good Intent for passenger."

In the midst of the bustle attending Garth's busiest moment of the day—while mail-bags were being exchanged, with the gravity befitting an affair of Her Majesty's—while parcels were being handed up and down between Will and the chattering knot of folk—Reuben Gaunt came swinging down the street.

Last year he had ridden in; but to-day he was on foot, and he clambered up to the empty seat at Cilla's side as if it were reserved for him. She turned shyly to him as soon as Garth was left behind and the white, sunlit riband of the highway stretched in front of them.

"You—you did not say last night that you had business, too, at Keta's Well."

"The same business that brought me here a year ago," he answered soberly. "There's some property I want to own——"

Cilla was looking ahead, and his tone misled her. "Surely you have property enough? Marshlands, father always says, is just the right size—big enough to keep a man busy all day and every day, and small enough to walk round it when he finds an idle morning."

"Well, yes. 'Tis a case of Naboth's vineyard, maybe. At any rate, I shall never care much for Marshlands till I get this other property to round it off."

Something in his tone made her glance quickly at him, and it was hard to believe that a year of upward struggle lay between the old Reuben and the new. His face was full of boyish mischief. He looked as if he had known never a care in the world, but had lived always in this warmth of the spendthrift, teeming spring. She understood him better in that moment—understood how easy it had been to name him "Running-Water," because they had given him never a chance, until last year, of proving his mettle. He had proved himself, once for all, and now was boy again until the next summons came.

Oilla let own her mood run with his. She knew his meaning now, and would not look at him, and could not trust herself to speak ; but the white road, and the green homely pastures, and the birds that fluttered up the hedge-sides in front of the rattling coach, led out, she knew, to the enchanted lands "beyond Garth hills." They lay nearer home, these lands, than Oilla of the Good Intent had guessed.

They were passing Widow Fletcher's now, and Will the Driver turned in his seat as they went by.

"I'm having a holiday, Mr. Gaunt," he laughed. "I won't say I'm glad, for it wouldn't be seemly ; and I can't say I'm grieved, for it wouldn't be true ; but the widow, she broke an ankle in trying to catch me up a week ago, just when I'd dodged her for once. Widows are trials, I own, and may be t'other life woman at Garth—her sister—may be laid by for awhile with a sprain, or a touch o' rheumatiz, or an ache in her little yer. There's always hope, as the fox said when he was leaving his tail in the keeper's trap."

Gaunt laughed in answer, and passed the banter which was true coinage here on the open highway ; but Oilla, stealing a glance at him, saw that the grave look had returned. He was thinking of a widow up at Ghyll yonder, who had met life from another and a braver standpoint.

She, too, felt that a chill had touched the warmth and glamour of this drive to Keta's Well, as if the breeze had shifted suddenly from west to east. She remembered the pool where Mrs. Mathewson and she had met while rescuing sheep from April snow, recalled the struggle between Reuben and Fool Billy, and the widow's tale of what had happened long ago at Marshlands. The tale had recurred to her many times during these past weeks, and with it a distrust of Reuben against which she struggled loyally.

"What are you thinking of ?" he asked, breaking a long silence.

Cilla knew this distrust would lie between them always if she did not answer frankly. She was glad he had given her so plain an opening. Hard as it was to speak, it would be harder afterwards, if once she let the chance go by; and Cilla was never one to let the bigger evil come for lack of courage to meet a less one.

I was thinking of Fool Billy, and a story I did not want to hear. Reuben, why do you always pass poor Billy as if he were nothing to you!"

"He gives me no chance to do aught else," said Gaunt, reddening as he met the questioning glance that would not be denied.

"Perhaps he knows—it is hard to tell what the poor lad understands, behind all that foolishness of his—perhaps he knows he's your half-brother, and that you've denied it time and time again. 'Tis your denial troubles me."

Cilla could be merciless when there was need to reach the truth. She would not let his glance waver; she compelled him to be honest.

"Cilla," he said, at last. "I *had* to deny it. I'll answer to my own shame at any time, but not to my father's. He may have been this or that, my father—but I'll lie any day to keep what good name I can for him."

Will the Driver turned again, and pointed up the fells with his whip.

"You always liked to see the deer, Miss Cilla," he broke in. The wind of his own fast driving had carried their talk behind him, and he did not know how welcome was the interruption. "They're browsing yonder near the fell-tops—just to the right o' the spinney—d'ye see them?"

Cilla sought for the brown specks, far up the pastures that stepped boldly to the sky. These specks of brown stood for the pride of bygone over-lords of Strathgarth, in the days when their deer forest stretched from Shepston out to Keta's Well, and a league or two beyond. And Will, whose fore-folk, like himself, had lived within the

limits of Garth's hills, was proud of their diminished forest's splendour.

This once Will got no answer from his passengers. It did not trouble him. His philosophy was old as the twisting, narrow road that lay in front of him.

"Gee-up, Captain! We're late," he said, laying a gentle lash across the leader. "We're always late, what with this constant plague of widows on the road."

Oilla leaned forward, her face between her hands, and watched the road slip past the hedgerows. This man beside her—of all men in the world—had humbled her. He had gone willingly into a house of plague; he, the acknowledged wastrel of the parish, had put his back into the work of making Marshlands what it should be, and had changed the stubborn outlook of his neighbours from dislike to growing friendliness. That was much; but the confession she had wrung from him meant more to this girl, whose sense of honour was clean and dainty as an April day. The father had done ill with his own life, and with his son's; yet Reuben had striven to keep what starveling flowers he could in bloom about the old man's grave.

Gaunt waited till she chose to break the silence. He had learned patience last August, as he had learned strength, while he waited on the sun-scorched uplands to know if Peggy o' Mathewson's would live or die. He had learned further patience while nursing a half-ruined property into new prosperity.

And suddenly Oilla turned to him, and his heart beat faster than ever it had done while winning the great race at Linsall Fair. All that the spring day held of tenderness, of trust and hope, and love o' life for living's sake, seemed gathered into Oilla's glance. He had won his biggest race of all.

"We'll get down here, Will," he said by-and-by, as they neared the old, green lane that led back to Garth.

"Thought you were bound for Keta's Well," said the driver, with a dalesman's frank curiosity.

"So we were; but we've changed our minds." Gaunt's laugh was a boy's again. He seemed not care how soon all Strathgarth knew the meaning of the glance that Cilla had given him. "You've forgotten the old saying, Will—folk are free to change their minds i' the spring, like the weather."

Cilla did not question, as she took his hand and slipped lightly to the highway. At another time her father's business up at Keta's Well would have been all-important; but to-day she had forgotten it.

"Humph!" muttered Will the Driver, as he drove forward between the lusty hedgerows. "Just a year since last I carried the lile fools as far as Keta's Well. 'Tis a long while, seeing a babby could have told the two o' them what ailed them. Well, I'm not complaining. If Miss Good Intent is half as bonnie wedded as she is single, there's none of us need grumble. *Gee-up*, Captain; Her Majesty will put up with a lot, but she gets terrible cross if we're late with her mails. *Gee-up*, lad, or I'll make ye!"

Gaunt had opened the gate, and Cilla and he were loitering down the lane which once had been the highway—the lane which now was grazed by sheep and cattle. There was a curious privacy about this abandoned road, a charm which haunts neglected thoroughfares. The raking fells lay white against the sky on one hand; on the other, lambs bleated to their mothers in the sheltered hollows. The birds could not be quiet, and a happy din went up into the sunshine and the warmth. The lark sang "like as if he'd burst his lile throat all to pieces," as Fool Billy put it, and the throistle piped, high and clear, as if he meant to be obeyed; and the curlews were dipping and wailing, wailing and dipping, with their note of everlasting sorrow.

A hare got up from under their feet. A squirrel peeped at them from the bough of a leaning sycamore. Men had been busy once along this green, neglected lane; and the

fret of their tired feet had passed, and the mother of us all had chosen this for her quiet house, where birds might nest, and flowers could bloom, and men's insolence was hidden out of sight.

If ever two folk were given the one right day and the one right place for wooing, Gaunt and Cilla were favoured now. The peace of the lane, the eagerness of all the teeming life about them, the very fell-tops, pointing with white fingers to the blue and happy sky, seemed made for them; and Cilla was proving once again the truth of the Garth saying, that "Miss Good Intent could always have Queen's weather for the asking."

A year ago they had trodden the same lane as boy and girl; had kissed, and fancied life held nothing better. They had seen life face to face since then, and moved through long, ugly days that seemed too sordid for romance; yet here was the glamour, walking step by step with them—a glamour that was built, not on the sands of fancy, but on foundations sure as those of the sturdy hills about them. Gaunt turned to look at Cilla. She was dainty in her lilac frock. Any man, passing her, would have halted for a second glance at this lass whom Strathgarth summers had treated kindly, whom Strathgarth winters had given a reliance unknown to folk bred under softer climates. He scarcely knew the face of which he had dreamed o' nights; its peace, its tender, eager beauty, were borrowed from all that lay beyond Garth hills and from all that lay within them.

They came to the bend of the lane where last year they had met Peggy o' Mathewson's, and Cilla halted for a moment.

"Poor Peggy," she murmured, generous and warm of sympathy as this day of spring that set the world to rights.

"It was never meant to be," said Reuben, with no assurance in his tone, but rather like a child who gropes helplessly for the answer to a riddle.

And Oilla smiled through her tears. "My dear, it was never meant to be. Reuben, there's a lile bird singing at my heart. I can't mistake the song."

"No wonder they called it Fairies' Lane," said Reuben. "I used to laugh at the notion once."

CHAPTER XXV

AT THE DAY'S END

DAVID THE SMITH had chosen this same day of spring for his return to Garth, though he had sent no word of his coming to Yeoman Hirst. He remembered the boisterous goodwill shown him when he left the old haunts to cross over-seas. Because he returned the same, single-hearted David who had loved Garth village from his babyhood, he was shy of such another welcome at his home-coming. He would not take the mail from Shepston—the mail which carried Gaunt and Oilla to their betrothal—but walked instead.

He wanted to see the daffodils in bloom in the crofts and the wayside gardens that bordered the high-road. He wanted to be free of chatter, and to feel his two legs carrying him, as a man's legs should, between the grey, remembered hills. He wanted, most of all, to find Oilla of the Good Intent at home, and to tempt her—God's pity on the man's brave simplicity—with tales of other lands.

At four of the afternoon he came to Garth, and shied, from old habit, when Widow Lister pattered out to meet him.

"Glad to see ye again, David," she said, coquetting, as she always did, with a hale and well-to-look-at man. "Bless me, what a power o' heat there must be, yonder over Garth hills. Ye're freckled and tanned, David. 'Tis good to look at a face like yours; puts one i' mind o' sun and hay-harvest."

"Oh, I'm well enough; but 'tis Garth for me, I reckon, till I'm taken to the kirkyard, and may be afterward."

The widow's face lengthened into grave, forbidding lines. "Afterward is as ye've done i' this life, David."

"Yes," said David, cheerily. "I'm content to rest on that stand-by, widow."

She was silent for awhile, daunted by a strength that was rooted deeper than her shallow soil would ever know.

"Your aunt Joanna has no such fear o' the after-life," she said, with sudden triumph. "She borrowed a tin kettle fro' me, did Joanna, and she forgot to return it, like, when she married into a heathen land."

"Ay, she's good at forgetting, and they're not all heathens there. But, see ye, widow, I didn't come all this way to talk o' tin kettles. I came to see bonnie Garth, with her face new washed for spring, and all the posies out i' the garden-strips."

With a good-humoured nod he moved on to Good Intent, and found the yeoman leaning over the gate of the seven-acre field, watching his lambs with that peculiar air of leisure and detachment from all worry which comes to farmers in and between the bustle of these warm, full-blooded days of spring.

"Have your ewes done well, then?" asked David, as quietly as if he had seen Hirst every day during the past months.

The yeoman turned with a start. "David! Now, ye startled me, I own. I was just thinking o' ye, and reckoning 'twould be all about time for ye to be taking shipboard home; and then your voice came sudden-like; and I fancied it must be your ghost come to tell us you were drowned at sea. There's the daft fool I've grown, David, since you left Garth."

"There's not much ghost about me," laughed David, as he gripped the other's hand.

"Well, no, if a grip like a pair o' pincers be aught to go by. Stand ye there, David, and let me take a square look at ye. I've never been better pleased to see a man i' my life."

He walked round about his friend, as if he were a specimen of farm-stock, whose points he was anxious to appraise correctly. Then he gave a great roar of approbation.

"Thought spring was treating me well when the ewes dropped pairs so grandly, and scarce a lamb lost ; but there was better to come, 'twould seem. David, ye'll have to stay i' Garth. 'Tis a different place without ye."

David looked about him, at the pastures, full of the music of lambing, at the rough-built walls that traced a grey, irregular pattern across the green face of the land, at the spinneys and out-lying farms which were so many landmarks to remembrance. Then he leaned his arms on the gate, and gave a quiet laugh.

"Oh, I'm here to stay," he said. "The months have been years to me out yonder. It will take a lot to 'tice me out o' Strathgarth Dale again."

"So what of all those traveller's tales ye promis' Cilla? I tell ye, David, she looks for livelier doings than ever she saw at home."

"Oh, I've tales enough, maybe. 'Tis a different life, but——"

"But naught so much to brag of?" put in Hirst. "There, that's just what I always said."

"The life's well enough for those it suits, but it's overyoung for me." David picked up a straw and chewed it with a pleasant sense of leisure. "'Tis this way, if I can get my tongue round a plain meaning. I'm ready to do a day's work with any man ; but when it's done, I like old things about me ; the old grindstone at the corner, and bits of garden-fronts, with their daisies, and London Pride, and lile clumps o' primroses. I want to be near all that my father loved, and his father afore him, and back to Flodden Field or near thereby. Out yonder 'tis naught but looking forward and hurrying. They'll come to our way of thinking by-and-by, when their roots have taken deeper hold ; and they'll do more work i' the year, though they tell ye otherwise."

This was the David who had left the homeland. Unwavering in his love for Strathgarth, quick to realize a new phase of life, yet slow to accept 'it, he returned unspoiled, a little surer of his faith in the righteousness of older lands and older ways.

"Your aunt Joanna didn't treat ye well," said Hirst, after one of the pleasant silences that long ago had helped to make the two men friends. "It puzzles me that ye bear no malice, like."

"She's as God made her, like all of us. There's little use in going against handiwork o' that sort. She asked me to go, and I went; and when she hadn't a use for me, I came back." He stooped to pick a fresh straw, and again laughed gently. "'Tis as simple as falling out of a tree, and no back-reckonings either way, now I'm free to live i' Garth again."

Hirst was not given to intuition. He thanked his Maker every Sabbath for the past week's mercies, and tended his flocks with cheery zeal throughout the next six days; but insight into the hidden workings of a man's character was rare with him.

He looked at David now—David, whose eyes were blue and honest as the sky that roved over the sloping fields, the rounded hills—and was compelled to understand his comrade. He knew now why Cilla had liked David well, but could not marry him. The "far" look in David's eyes was that which Nature's priests wear—the look that Billy the Fool carried when he watched a pair of nesting throistles—the look of the folk who are content to look on at life's business, and to help it forward whenever a chance for kindness meets them at the road corner.

Again the friendly silence fell between them. David returned to mother earth again, and his voice had a wholesome snap in it. "What is Gaunt o' Marshlands doing these days? Running still to waste like water?"

"Well, no. He's found running water has its uses in a thin-soil country, and is tilling his lands with it instead."

"Gaunt tilling his lands ! Cuckoo's eggs will be hatching honest nestlings next."

"I thought you said folk were as God made 'em," said Hirst, with a touch of sharpness.

"Ay, but Gaunt's as he made himself. I can't abide the man, and never could."

So Hirst, to his own surprise, found himself defending Reuben. He spoke warmly of his fearlessness at Ghyll, of his plucky fight to win back a good name for his house. Not until met by this dogged opposition of David's had the yeoman guessed how well he had grown to like the yeoman squire of Marshlands.

"Let bygones be bygones," he finished. "'Tis not like ye, David, to keep up a grudge like this."

"No, 'tis not like me, and I never felt it for another man ; and I won't say I'm proud o' the feeling. But there it is, and there it will have to bide a while longer, seeing I can't get rid of it."

Hirst knew that Cilla was the cause of the ill-feeling, and talked no more of Reuben. He chatted of Garth's doings through the winter, led David on to talk of his adventures ; but all the while he noted a growing restlessness in his companion. David the Smith kept glancing down toward the farm, then up at the pastures, as if in great fear or hope of some intrusion.

"No, she's not at home," said Hirst, with a sly roar of laughter. "The lile lass is out at Keta's Well."

David looked shyly at the yeoman, surprised that his secret had been guessed so easily. Then a great loneliness took hold of him—an instinct of trouble and foreboding. He had come straight to Good Intent, not pausing even for a visit to his forge ; and there had been one picture in his mind. He would find Cilla—wearing the lilac gown—at the farm. He would see a new light in her eyes after the long absence and the unexpected return. He would find readier speech than of old.

"I've travelled so far," he said, more to himself than

to Hirst; "and she's a stay-at-home most days o' the year, and I fancied she'd be about the place just this one day."

"Oh, tuts! She'll be back in a few hours' time, David. No need to go thinking the end o' the world is coming, because a lass is doing some bits o' business for her father."

Hirst, with all his cheeriness, was ill at ease. He knew that this mar's dream would not come true; he felt that a hint in time would be kindly, and yet he shrank from giving pain. In his indecision he turned slowly down the croft, and David followed him.

"Why, that's Cilla's voice," said the yeoman, halting suddenly. "She's home before her tin; and how she's managed it beats me, for the mail isn't due for an hour yet."

And David watched the white highway below, where it crept from shelter of the trees and curved past Good Intent. He felt sick and helpless.

Then he saw her, for the first time in the months that had seemed years in passing. Gaunt and she stepped into the road, as if they owned it and the whole, round world as well. She was wearing the lilac gown, but it had not been donned for David the Smith. They passed out of sight toward the porch of Good Intent; and, because they were looking at each other, they did not see the two men in the croft above.

"Well, you've got your wish," said Hirst, bewildered by the misery in David's face, and trying still to believe in his old creed that all would yet go well with everybody. "We'll step down, David, lad, and Cilla shall give you tea of her own brewing, and——"

"Thank ye," said David, heavily, "but I'll be getting down to the forge. That's where my heart will have to bide, from now forrard, and I might as well make a beginning."

The yeoman watched him go. "Oh, bless me," he muttered ruefully, "I ache to see things go right for all,

same as I ache for victuals when I'm hungry. Pity I hadn't two like Oilla, instead of one, if David's bent on breaking his heart like any raw young lad."

A busy hum sounded from the forge as David neared it. Not many weeks ago the fire-glow had lain across the road, a crimson splash on the white April snow; now it fought for mastery with the clear, hot sunlight. David lifted his head when he heard the rhythmical song of the bellows, as an old foxhound rouses himself when music of the pack sounds down the wind. The blow had fallen on him mercilessly; but already he felt heartened a little, a very little, by the sturdy light of the forge. He stepped to the doorway and looked in. Dan Foster's lad was working the bellows, and Billy the Fool was playing at smithy work. David watched the man's muscles tighten and relax, relax and tighten, as he plied his hammer; and an odd thought came to him that the world's work would be better done if more folk played as Billy did.

Billy paused at last to wipe the sweat from his forehead, and turned, and saw David standing in the doorway. There was no surprise in his face. He was content to play through the long winter, until the swallows came to build their nests again in Garth. He knew they would return, and waited patiently; for Billy, as all Garth knew, "was not wise."

"First o' the swallows came yesterday, David the Smith," he said, "and blessed if ye haven't followed, quick as ye could scramble. 'Tis good to see ye both."

David was sore at heart. If he had been a woman, he would have leaned against the smithy wall and sobbed himself into a makeshift peace. As it was, he sought about for some trivial help in need. He found the help in that quiet, persistent thought of others, which, perhaps, had lost him Oilla; the wise were apt to think him dull.

He took a pouch from his pocket, and handed it to Billy. When the black clay pipe was charged, he passed a match across. It pleased him to see Billy strike it tran-

quilly upon the anvil, pleased him to watch the slow wreaths of pipe-smoke curl among the rafters.

"Your 'baccy always smoked a lile thought sweeter than other folk's," said Fool Billy.

In some muddled way David understood that the welcome he had looked for, here in Garth, came from this massive, tranquil man whose power of speech was hindered. The warm air of the forge, the smell of it, soothed the fierce pain of David's loss.

Billy the Fool laughed unexpectedly; it was his privilege. He had caught sight of Dan Foster's lad, standing idle by the bellows with a look of wonderment about his cherry-red face.

"A queer lad, he," said Billy. "He's been working ever since you left, he has, while this same fool has been a-frolicking. 'Tis a terrible pranksome matter, this hammering horseshoes into shape. Ye take a bit o' hard iron, and it says it will no way budge, however hard ye hit it; and ye say it *shall* budge; and then it gets into a fearful rage, and spits at ye with its lile, red sparks; and ye go on hammering, just for frolic, like, till bless me if there hasn't a horseshoe grown out o' yond same bit of iron, like a sycamore-leaf fro' the bud."

The smith had lit his own pipe, and was listening with something of the old content to Billy's familiar line of thought. All the fool's interest in life, trace it deep enough, centred round growth of some kind. It might be growth of the plants under sheltered banks that caught the first footsteps of the spring, which claimed attention from him; it might be the mother-work of birds when they hatched their eggs in the many nests he over-watched, or the whitening of the pastures when ewes began to drop their lambs; it might be the forging of an iron rail, or the building of a wall; but the instinct at the root of all his pleasures was growth. Untrammelled, as no other man in Garth was, by the frets and small indignities of daily life, Fool Billy had learned insight into the deeper truths.

He could write no verses, nor wished to ; but he moved through the quiet village life, for all that, a great poet, not of his own dale only, but of the world.

David's nature was akin to his in many ways, and at times such as this, when Billy let his heart peep out, and showed why *toi* was play to him, the smith was apt to feel a touch of awe, as if he listened to a greater than himself who was talking of eternal verities. The next moment Billy would lose his high, abstracted look, and would return to some foolish detail of the world about him. He did so now.

"I've your money all ready for ye, David," he said, going to the far corner of the smithy, and reaching down a small box from the shelf. "Made the box myself, soon as ever ye left Garth, and made a slit, I did—big enough for money to go through, but not for fingers. Te-he, David the Smith ! Not for fingers, I reckon."

David was puzzled, as the other jingled the coins and thrust the box into his hands. "What is all this, Billy ?" he asked.

"Play-money," said the fool impassively. "Ye see, David, I've no more use for coins than for pebbles in a stream ; so I saved 'em up against your home-coming. Charged terrible high prices, I, for shoeing a horse ; and folk laughed, and they paid it, they did, because 'twas only Fool Billy ; and there'll be a right proper nest-egg ready for ye, David."

The tears were in David's eyes at last. He had gone on a wasted errand to another land, and had returned empty of thanks and pocket ; he had come cheerily home, ready to start afresh with strong hand and a clean conscience as his only capital, and had encountered Widow Lister and her anxiety touching a tin kettle borrowed years ago. He had looked down from Hirst's croft at a strip of sunlit high-road, and had seen a pair of lovers, full of spring's tender insolence and right-of-way. All had slipped from under his feet—all, save Billy the Fool, whose pleasure,

like his own, was to give—always to give—asking no return, claiming only a pipetful of tobacco at the day's end, and a tranquil smoke over the morrow's gifts to other folk.

David passed a hand across his eyes, and moved to the navil, and took up the hammer. "Ye can run home, like lad," he said, turning to Dan Foster's lad. "Stay, here's a sixpence for ye to spend on yourself. Billy, 'tis work and play again, as i' the old days. Just bend your back to the

THE END.

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